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Ernest Hill

PITY ABOUT EARTH

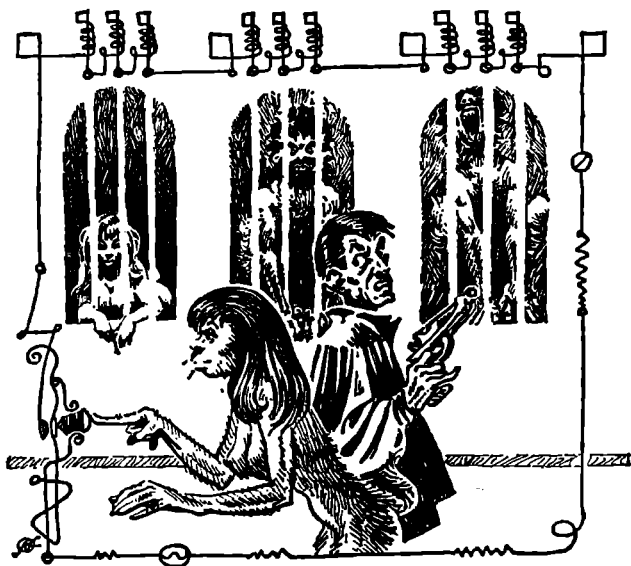
*The old planet's gone, but her
ways are still headline news....*

Complete Novel



Ernest Hill

PITY ABOUT EARTH



ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

PITY ABOUT EARTH

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Printed in U.S.A.

SHALE SMILED. A plugged in, switched on, far and away smile, lips drawn back across teeth as white as only alumina crowns could make them. The muscles of his fingers were poised on the point of contraction, a twitch, a grip in the making; his knees were a fraction less than braced, and there was a high-cock-a-lorum look in his roguish eyes, bright, alert and devil-may-care-confident behind the heavy, sleeping lids.

She was giving him a first-rate run for his money. Fleet as an antelope. Swift down the mountainside, in and out among the boulders, plunging like a fox under the bracken, through the gorse, barefoot and hair flying, across the stream and into the wood. Useless of course. She could never escape him in the end. It would be enough to wait until she tired and came to him, but he did not wait. Action Shale, they called him somewhere—where? Who cared? He was riding the wind down the mountain, swinging from bough to bough through the dark, scented glades of the wood. There were obstacles, of course, as always. Her relations lying in wait in the undergrowth and firing missiles and energy pellets and lobbing grenades. A large bird with a razor beak. He broke its neck in passing and went scudding over the winking, pink-white magnolia bushes to where she fell, panting and exhausted in the soft ferns. Her dress was split from the shoulder and the white flesh showed and she looked at him—pathetic and pleading. An old man—her father probably—appeared, hobbling from the shadows on two crutches—the last obstacle, no doubt. Smiling grimly, he snatched the crutches away and broke them, one at a time, across his knee. With a flick of his wrist he pushed the old man into a blackthorn bush and for a moment almost forgot the girl in the fun of watching the cripple's struggles to free himself from the thorn. "A cripple on prickles," he said, "and funny as a crutch." He turned again to the girl. "At last," he said, "over five continents and quite a number of seas—seven, I think. It's high time we had you bedded down in the mud."

"No," she said. "Please!"

She was trying to cover her bare shoulder with the thin and inadequate strip of cotton and her cheeks were wet with

tears. He put his hands on his hips, threw back his head and laughed. "Like Falstaff," he said. "That's what I am. Who the B91 virus was Falstaff?" He leaned forward and took her by the hair. There was a tap on his shoulder. The half-light of the wood lightened and brightened and the outlines of the trees became vague. "No!" He shouted. "Don't anyone dare switch off. Not after five continents and seven seas!" He threw himself at the woman, but she was already misty—insubstantial. A moment later, she and the wood and the trees and the cripple in the blackthorn had faded and he was floating on a warm, pink and blue sea and seagulls were calling and there were porpoises all around him, whistling. It was the usual transition period. The halfway, marking-time lull-the-mind-to-rest interval for adjustment. Sensivators were like that. They never shot you back into full consciousness at the flick of a switch. They gave you time to wind up. No one likes plunging headfirst into cold reality after a happy period of subjectivity and manipulation of symbols. No one likes it and Shale liked it least of all. When the porpoises finally towed him into harbor and he woke up in the dull, round sleeping quarters in his own ship, the *Admark*, he liked it still less. Groaning and rubbing his eyes and focusing them at last on the calendar, he realized that, far from being at the end of his journey as he should have been, he was only a few weeks out from Lemos. Phrix, of course. By the blue sun of Asgard, he would tie Phrix down and break him, bone by bone, with a monkey wrench, if there was one on the ship—and there should be. No one who wants to dominate his fellows should ever be without a monkey wrench.

He pulled the suction pads testily from his navel and heaved himself up from the bunk.

"Phrix!" He roared.

In a moment, Phrix was standing there, disciplined, attentive, thumbs in line with the seam of his space suit trousers, for all the world as if he didn't know what was going to happen to him. As if waking an archexecutive out of a sensivator session were a matter of little importance and called for no explanation. Still sleepy from the pink and blue sea, Shale yawned before hitting him with all his considerable strength in the solar plexus. He should have kicked him properly as he lay coughing and spluttering on the floor, but he felt suddenly tired and Phrix was not worth the effort. Besides, Shale was a moderate, temperate man. He returned to his bunk and flicked the dispenser switch and waited while three fingers of seventy-five percent Venusian Burgundy spurting into the beaker. He turned the container

thoughtfully in his fingers, sniffed at the rough, coarse aroma and then threw the contents into the face of Phrix.

As he refilled, he considered his subordinate. Writhing with pain, splashed with the pink liquid, Phrix still maintained an air of something—what was it?—dignity? The Groils were like that. Dignified. Unruffled. The body might suffer and do all the things a suffering body does, but the Groil mind remained aloof, tranquil, harboring neither judgment nor resentment. He put his foot on Phrix's face between the whorl-like protuberances of his frontal lobes and pushed. As the back of Phrix's head made contact with the metal wall of the cabin, Shale refilled his beaker. The humanoid monstrosity still retained its dignity. *You have to hand it to them, Shale thought. They had courage, even if that just means they were made in a certain courageous way. Everyone is only what the accidents of heredity bequeathed them with. It's pointless to admire a hero and denigrate a coward—one nick in the chromosome chain with a skillful scalpel and we could all be heroes. Nevertheless, we admire the heroes and spit in the face of the cowards.*

"Okay," Shale said, thawing somewhat with the warmth of the alcohol inside him. "Okay, so you woke me! So what? I can knuckle down again. What did you think? I was going to spend the year and a half on this trip wide awake or something? You nuts or something?"

"Beg pardon, Archexecutive," Phrix said in his usual level voice, respectful, without a trace of subservience. "There is a message. It was said to wake you."

"Message, eh? How come we get a message? Aren't we through the light barrier yet?"

"We approach barrier now. Too late for message. Just time when I switched you in."

"You're a horned goat, Phrix." Shale threw himself heavily on his bunk. Even with full anti-G stabilizers—and no Archexecutive would own a ship without full anti-G stabilizers—the human body was still pretty weighty as the ship reached the peak of its acceleration curve before leveling out across the barrier. "Don't you know yet, no message is important enough to bring me back just for the fun of looking at it? What do I care about messages? You switched me out of something more important than all the messages in the universe. I'll never recapture just that combination of everything that's worthwhile in a space-dream again."

"I apologize, Archexecutive, but you can switch in now."

"I'll switch in, all right, but it won't be the same. It never is the same. It'll leave me on edge for the rest of the trip—as much of it as I'll see and that won't be much, believe

you me. Let's have a look at it then—where's the message?"

One never knew how Phrix switched things through, Shale reflected. Whether he had a concealed remote control button located in his armpit or whether he whistled some ultrasonic blast. Things happened when you told Phrix to act. Perhaps it was just willpower—the old mind-over-matter idea. With a mind like a Groil it wouldn't be surprising. You could do things with lobes like that. Whatever it was, you just said, "Where's the message?" and there it was on your own private bedroom screen.

Shale was amused. The mouth movements of the face on the screen were already too slow to be more than vaguely perceptible. A full minute to form the letter *o*. Getting slower. The sound a continuous low-pitched oscillation. A squawk without end. They were very near the light barrier now and safely gaining on the message. Any moment and the order would come to belt down on the couch, assuming the pilot was aware that his master was, contrary to his custom, awake. There would be the usual shuddering as the ship lurched through the critical speeds and then a recommencement of the previous sharp acceleration, with time, in terms of the screen, in reverse gear. The mouth getting faster, the spoken words unintelligible, a gabble from end to beginning and the face fading out at the point where it had switched on. No importance. A voice from Asgard probably. The Publisher's P.A. keeping tabs on him. "Did you reach Shale, P.A.?" "No, Publisher, sir, he was ahead of the message all the way. Should catch up with him in three years with electro-mag acceleration. That is, if he is heading for Gromwold." "A good man, Shale. Hustles. I like to see a man hustle." "Yes, Publisher, sir. A hustler, sir. The Empire couldn't do without him."

He, Shale, was indeed a hustler, although no one had ever heard a conversation from Asgard say so. You cabled Asgard now and again. Whenever anything happened that might show you at your best, enterprising, industrious, an example to your less industrious fellows—the sort of rock Higher Management uses for the cornerstones of its more rewarding projects. Asgard seldom replied. Once in a lifetime perhaps, and a lifetime is a sizable distance along the underbelly of eternity. One always thought every message might be that lifetime's one from Asgard. It was good to be prepared.

Imaginary as the interchange had been, Shale had unconsciously sat to attention, dusted and straightened the folds of his loose space robe and half bowed at even the thought

of the dread name. The Publisher. Yes, the Publisher. Did he really exist? If he existed, what did he look like? That is, if he had form at all. A one-headed biped, perhaps, like any one of the Ruling Races? Or with the two temples bulging into shell-shaped carbuncles like Phrix, Shale's assistant manager? Phrix was a Groil, evolutionary senior race of all. There had been Groils in some far spot before the amoeba came to Earth. Pity. Pity about Earth.

There must of course be a Publisher. Someone at the top. You couldn't have a Publisher's P.A. without a Publisher to be P.A. to. And he certainly had a P.A.—Shale had heard him at least once. You couldn't have an Advertisement Manager to the major inter-galactic publishing house, a man like himself, a hundred thousand papers with multimillion circulations under him, without a Publisher to publish them. There was, of course, a Publisher. Man becomes skeptical of the ultimate Great One he never sees, but the ultimate Great One must be there. Or something Ultimately Great. Every pyramid has a top to it. No ordinary person had ever been to Asgard, but Asgard was there. Any telescope could pick out the luminous blue glow of its sun—the solitary star outside the galaxies. If there was an Asgard, then, necessarily, there was a Publisher to live on it. No heaven without a god to sit in it and dangle his legs, using all the worlds as his footstool in turn. The chain of command: Publisher—P.A.—Advertisement Manager. No one else mattered. Editors were ten a cent, hands cupped for the loose change left over when the budget balanced—as it always did.

"We are about to pass through the light barrier. Passengers and crew will belt down! With your permission, Arch-executive Shale?" Pilot speaking. The ship was fully automatic and would break through the light barrier anyway, but its pilot was an integral part of it, just as Shale was a part of the Publishing House.

"Permission granted!" he said.

The ship shuddered and bucked and the star clusters outside the porthole danced. The screen mouth was moving and the squawk of the voice slipped from the lowest audible frequency into silence. And then the jolt.

There was a sense of awe in breaking the light barrier. One passed through it on every trip, but each time was like the first all over again. There was nothing mystic about the speed of light. You opened the motors and went a little faster, that was all. You would go on increasing speed to ten times L and think nothing of it. But there, at that little barrier where space and time were mixed and for a moment were one and the same thing, you paused breathless before

forging ahead with a jolt and a shudder and a dancing of all the stars. Why? What was so significant about this speed we have always called L? The speed of light, as we now know, varies considerably, slowing down the further it gets from its source. It must if it is using up energy overcoming the resistance of the aurons, the semi-material particles that are everywhere where nothing else is. The universe is much smaller than was once thought when the speed of light was supposed to be constant.

What of L? L is the speed of light emitted by one E.S. (Earth Sun) at the time of emission, but regarded for practical purposes as being constant within the first twenty-four hours. After that time it begins to slow down appreciably. In one year it will have halved.

Signals, of course, can be boosted. By accelerating the electro-magnetic wave, communication between planets can take place in a fraction of the time it takes the light of their suns to travel the distance. All this considered, it is strange that L, the original speed of light the forefathers on Earth calculated from the eclipses of the moons of Venus, that this Earth light speed should be the critical factor, the threshold over which the passing ship shudders and groans. The initial speed of light from its source was the speed at which, for convenience, most ordinary messages are sent.

"You remember the quasars?" Shale asked, as the ship settled down to an even acceleration. "The stars like Asgard?"

Once through the barrier, the belts on the bunks had released and Phrix had returned dutifully to within striking distance. It was time for Shale to couple himself back to the sensivator and pass the time away more profitably than by lying on his back and staring at Phrix, but oddly enough, Shale felt the need of conversation and human fellowship, even if only with a part-human Groil.

"I remember quasars," Phrix answered, probably with the central, humanoid area of his three-crowned head. It had been a stupid question anyway. The Groils had known all about quasars and most other things before one-headed archetypes had even begun to speculate. Quasars were thought to be a long way off, millions of light-years. But then, the speed of light was believed to be constant. The light from quasars, like the light from the sun of Asgard, travels very slowly. It was a foolish question in another way. Phrix kept his mind, the humanoid part of it, focused always on the matter at hand, and that, as far as he was concerned, was always business. Perhaps Groils talked about other things

among themselves, but with the Ruling Races they confined themselves to things they were paid to do.

"Paid circulation of the *Monitor* on Gromwold, one billion," Phrix said, obviously now using the memory area of his right-hand carbuncle. "We carry three billion copies."

"Jettison!" Shale ordered.

The bundles were ticked off on the enumerator and stacked by auto-handlers in the air lock. A touch of a button that was in any case quite capable of touching itself, and two billion copies of the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* were sucked into space at a speed of approximately 2L. It was a wasteful process, of course, these tactics of jettison, but everyone did it, the smaller companies as mercilessly as the larger. The Inter-Galactic Data Control Board and the Auto-Audit Bureau of Circulations monitored the output of the presses on all the printing planets and the advertisers were informed of the number printed. How many reached the bookstalls was neither here nor there—it was not the function of statisticians to check on ultimate distribution. There were vast clouds of newspapers and magazines hurtling in deep space or orbiting unchartered suns. Shale needed a particularly high circulation for a client on Gromwold. His conscience was clear: he had printed every copy he had claimed.

"We'll get him, of course," Shale said aloud.

"Subterranean Thermal?" Phrix interpreted the thought trend with the uncanny perception of all Groils. "Good account. They want business. We get it for them."

"I don't know about that." Shale shrugged. "We want their advertising. Getting business is their affair. What's advertising got to do with business? Think we work for them or something?"

"Much good business on Gromwold," Phrix said. "Ripe for Subterranean Thermal. New tower heated by active volcano. Test drillings in a number of states. Heat is there. Only have to pipe it."

"Get some stuff for the editors," Shale ordered. "Anything to please S.T. Shoot it in if they advertise, leave it out if they don't. Have to watch these Gromwold comedians. They think you run a paper for their benefit. How many companies can do this piped heat stuff anyway?"

"Only S.T."

"Where else can they do it?"

"Nowhere. Only on Gromwold."

"Good. Get their advertising and whistle it up to the newsad boys. I'm switching in now for the next eighteen months and if you bring me back again I'll cut your lobes off. I'm scheduled to fade in when we orbit Shorne. I'm

dropping off there while you go on to Gromwold. That clear?"

"Metital!" Phrix interpreted.

"Mind your own damn business," Shale snapped. "You know too much with those bulging brains of yours. Keep your menial place, lackey!"

"Only one brain," Phrix corrected. "Enlarged lobes. Very sensitive. You'll get them one day. In a million years or so. Very useful. Comes with use."

"We're the Ruling Races," Shale said dangerously, a slow anger kindling in the adrenal-sympathetico system the Groils had long ago sublimated. "What do we need with lobes?"

"You need mine," Phrix told him. "All facts I know. Intuition—developed—is most valuable. Without me, you have to study. Learn things. Employ spies. Make mistakes. Not with me. You need to know nothing. Leave all to me. Much simpler, no mistakes. I do not think—I know."

Shale wanted to sack him. Banish him to a penal planet. At least demote him to something fittingly more menial in the classified advertising department. There were other Groils as good as Phrix—or were they? Loyal, conscientious, industrious, clear-thinking in a wooden, pedantic sort of way; tireless mentally—always some part of the three brains awake. He was the perfect subordinate. Management needed none of these things; it could do as it liked. It was subordinates who had to prove their worth. Perhaps Phrix was not expendable. He needed keeping in his place, that was all. Menial. All Groils were menial. Let menials once think they matter, or give them the right of free speech, and you were back with the troubles of antiquity: trade unions and management dabbling in welfare schemes, and hard-headed industrialists wasting time posing as humanists and encouraging their menials to think that their shoulders had been created for any other purpose than putting to wheels that would turn just as well without them.

"I don't want Metita mentioned," Shale said. "You advise me on business as and when I tell you to. Personal things are mine alone. Keep out."

"Metita is not good for you," Phrix persisted amicably. "A Salumi. Ruling Race and Salumi bad mixture. Ruling Races bad only by default. No conscience. Vacuum. Salumis positively evil. Fill Ruling Race vacuum. Very retrograde, Salumi in vacuo."

"Conscience!" Shale roared. "Of course I've got no conscience! What the B91 virus is conscience anyhow?"

"Conscience to do accepted things. Ruling Races have standards by custom. Not good standards but not bad standards either. Advertisement Manager has no conscience with

clients. Conforms to standards toward staff and friends. Salumis have no standards at all. Very different. Very bad."

"I've no standards to staff or to you or to anyone and I've no friends." Shale stared at him contemptuously for a moment, stung nevertheless by the inference that he was bad by default rather than properly, positively evil. Better a cloven hoof than a cat's paw, any day. "All men are enemies," he said. "That's the first thing you learn in life if you want to be an archexecutive. The universe has never been any different, whatever men have said to impress their fellows or catch their votes. There's only one thing that matters between you and me: I'm the boss and you're the menial. And that's the way its going to stay. So keep out of my hair." When Phrix did not answer, he said, "Salumis best bint." He had fallen unconsciously half into the attenuated syntax of the Groils and half into the normal client-ad manager shorthand of class-ad sloganry.

Phrix looked at him steadily with the unwavering, deep-set gray eyes characteristic of his race. Groils neither smile nor frown, since facial contortions distort the true presentation of facts and Groils are factual in word and deed. No Groil will gloss over a truth by presenting it obliquely, coyly or snugly in a scabbard smile. A smile may gloss and dazzle and the truth slip by unnoticed. A frown may warn and truth hides from fear. There is only one way to present truth—with the features immobile.

Uneasy under the steady scrutiny of his menial subordinate, Shale rose slowly from his couch. Drawing his fist back with unhurried deliberation, he struck the unblinking Phrix a savage blow in the mouth. Phrix was a vegetarian and his teeth were sharp. The gushing blood seemed to excite Shale still further.

"Now what?" he shouted. "Groils can't feel emotion, can they? We'll see about that. I'll make you hate me, Phrix. I'll make that mealy-cake mouth of yours snarl. There'll be some new tri-hydrofflorate acid in your milk and balsam stomach juices when I've finished with you."

Phrix picked himself carefully up from the cabin floor. He wiped his lips with a pocket handkerchief.

"I don't think so," he said. "You forget I know blow is coming. Lobal intuition. No resentment felt. Ruling Races violent. Pity. Regret that. Waste of energy. Distorts thinking. Thinking is all-important, strength serves no purpose. Better to think than rule."

"I give the orders," Shale said savagely. "I don't need to think. And you—you think when I tell you to."

"Yes, Archexecutive."

"And switch your lobes off until I tell you to use them."

"If you say so, Archexecutive."

"Right. Now I'm bedding down for the next eighteen months. You can amuse yourself as you like. Only wake me and you'll find yourself jettisoned in deep space, got that?"

"I shall pass the time in meditation, Archexecutive."

"You do that."

Shale slapped the suction pad back on his navel and in thirty seconds he was rounding the Horn on a windjammer of which he was the captain. The crew were all young, fit, handsome, brave, intelligent, loyal, industrious, hard-working and female. They wore very little under their oilskins and sou'westers. The voyage would last the full eighteen months with occasional landfall in tropical harbors.

II

"WE ARE in concentric orbit with Shorne and Gromwold, Archexecutive."

Shale rubbed the tang of the salt sea from his eyes. He felt fit, which he attributed to the fresh air, smell of the seaweed, exercise on poop and quarter deck and no doubt to the ministrations of the ship's complement of sixty-one able-bodied sea-nymphs. He had a quick breakfast of roughage and protein-paste and a beaker of Gromwold schnapps, after which he felt in fine fettle and ready for Shorne and the Salumi, Metita. It had been variously estimated that one Salumi is equal to fifty, sixty or seventy-five Ruling Race women, depending on what it is one looks for in a woman.

"Right!" Shale ordered. "Action stations! I'm dropping off on Shorne. You get yourself around the ad boys on Gromwold. Let them know I'm here. See what the setup's like and put some ginger in them. I'll join you in a week or two and sack half of them. Then we'll go on to Borzon."

"Pour encourager les autres?"

"What the B91 virus language is that?"

"Earth classic, Archexecutive."

"Thought they spoke English on Earth?"

"There were other languages in antiquity."

"Pity about Earth!" Shale muttered reverently.

Everyone said "Pity about Earth." It was reverent. The Ruling Races were reverent about nothing else. Only Earth. None of them knew why, nor where exactly Earth was or had been. Earth was the mother planet, the great frog who had spawned them all. Saying "Pity about Earth" was one of the things everyone did—and one of the things no one did, was to ask why. To do what was not done was bad. To talk

about Earth was like mentioning the B91 virus. It was profane—an expletive but not a subject for discussion. Think about it—speak about it—and it would hear you and creep into your system when you weren't looking. Everyone knew what a B91 virus might do but no one knew about Earth. But Earth was as good as the B91 was bad, and it was always as well to keep away from extremes. In antiquity, no one had mentioned cancer for the same reason and everyone had kept at a respectful distance from God and from anyone thought to have an affinity with the Heavenly Host. *God* and *Hell* had remained as swearwords long after everyone had forgotten what they meant.

In a few days, Shale, in his personal orbiter, was circling Shorne, the small brother of Gromwold. Gromwold was big as planets go. Shorne had no mountains, but through the fleecy clouds, streaming apart with the rush of the craft, it was a continuous undulation of low green hills and golden valleys. It could have been an idyllic planet, but men, and not green grass and waterfalls, make idylls. Nevertheless, it was civilized and peaceful on Shorne. There was a subject race, which did all the manual work normally done by machine on any other planet; heavy industry, in consequence, had never gained a foothold, being unwanted and unnecessary. The subject race were the Salumis, whose womenfolk were renowned for soulless beauty. Their beauty was in fact such that it made the absence of a soul a matter of complete irrelevance. Shorne exported knowledge and imported spacecraft and knockabout jet-cars and very little else.

Circulations on Shorne were very limited and there were no potential advertisers. There was, however, Metita, a Salumi. Metita's father had been given Ruling Race status in return for services which otherwise would have cost money in terms of good Ruling Race hard currency—a million mylia. Metita's father was Director of one of the vast Shornian laboratories that provided the knowledge, or at least the data, from which all knowledge derives; that was Shorne's principal export. Barely advertised at all, yet all the universe knew that data came from Shorne.

Metita was beautiful even for a Salumi. She had yellow eyes of fire and long golden hair and a skin of satined ivory. She was one and half standard Galactic meters tall, weighed 112 standard Galactic pounds and was just as sinuous as a serpent with no bones at all but an india rubber spine, reciprocating pelvis, ice-cold hands and diamond-sharp nails.

At the moment of Shale's arrival in Lulonga, the city of the hills and capital of Shorne, Metita was writhing in

ecstasy and exultation in the arms of Kantor. She was nibbling at the jugular vein, occasionally snapping at the left earlobe and all the time searching with long-nailed, slender fingers in the ridges of his rib cage. Probing and finding areas of sensitivity with consummate skill and delight. Her expertise was enough to make any man forget his conscience and Kantor had no conscience to forget.

Kantor was advertisement manager of the *Gromwold Times and Echo*, a low-circulation local job—one of the many single-planet papers that had either escaped the Publisher's notice or were beneath his archexecutive's contempt. Kantor was small-fry in the publishing world, but he had ambition and charm. Metita found his charm, for the time at any rate, more important than his inter-galactic status. She hissed with pleasure as he finally pinioned her to the couch.

"Shale's due today on Shorne," Kantor told her, arched above her on muscular arms.

"Damn Shale," she murmured. "Quickly! Come to me! I want you!"

"You're Shale's frippet," he said. "Shouldn't you be waiting for Shale?"

"Hurry!" she shrieked. "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! You torture me with this waiting!"

"Shale!" he said.

"I stab him in the entrails," she hissed. "I cut his liver out and give it to you. Take me now!"

"Will you?" he asked.

"Will I what?" She was suddenly cold and her eyes narrowed into bright amber slits. Bargaining with a Salumi, as Kantor knew, was like bathing with a hungry barracuda. He had her now in a position where she was likely to agree to anything. He wanted her not only to agree but to remember what it was she had agreed to afterward.

"Will I what?" she repeated. Her teeth, he noticed, were green like polished marble, with blue and white veins.

"Kill Shale," he said.

"So that's what you want! You tickle and prod and chivy at my breasts and all you want is Shale!"

"What's Shale to you?" he asked. "Once in a while, on his way to Gromwold, he drops in and you coil yourself about him like a hungry hydra. I'm always near at hand—I can drop in any time."

"Shale is big," she said, but she reached up to trace the line of his sternum with a thoughtful finger. "An archexecutive. There are no archexecutives on little Shorne. You—you are a little man."

"The *Times and Echo* is growing. We have offers from

other spheres. Interested parties. Without Shale, the Publisher's empire would crumble—at least on the fringe planets. What do you have of his bigness but the prestige of the tattle?"

"So you want Shale dead?" she asked, wriggling against him like a happy panther. "Why don't you kill him yourself? You are much bigger than little me. Much stronger. Hold him in a big, strong hand and—ker-utch! His throat is slit and his blood is piping warm and sunset red from a gap like a frog's mouth from ear to ear. Kill him yourself, big, strong Kantor. Kill him very dead."

"You know what industrial murders are." He shrugged. "Shale kills me and nobody bothers to notice. But if I kill Shale, all his papers will have my picture and they'd have me before the industrial court for breach of ethics. Ethics is what the bigger groups call it: you are guilty in direct proportion to your ability to get caught. But mistress murder is different. No one would blame you; they would all be crowding in to take Shale's place. Everyone hates Shale's guts anyway."

She laughed with a drawing back of her lips over the emerald green teeth and a peep of a curled tongue-tip.

"I'll kill Shale for you," she said. "Crush me to you until all desire is gone and then, when all the wells are dry, I shall need something to fill them up again. Love is a small thing, it is so quickly over. There are other ways to happiness. We play, we Salumis. We laugh and play."

"Torture," he said, avoiding her eyes. There was something frightening in their sudden opacity and in the touch of her lips, at first flaccid and then drawn slowly back across the teeth.

"Torture," she agreed, her desire for him whetted by the thought of it. "My maidens will prick him with hot pins, while I—I will . . ." She chuckled happily at a private, inner vision and, inspired, sank her teeth deep into Kantor's neck. He hardly noticed.

The marble slab tilted behind Shale as he entered the anteroom below the concrete expanse of the house on the hill. It closed with a loud slam. It was cool inside, among the pillars of pink quartz, aquamarine feldspar, Gromwold soapstone and opal Borzonian alabaster. It was cool and silent and there were shadows and soft, green light. The sun of Shorne and Gromwold shone through translucent strips of the marble-like emerald stone quarried only in the Lulonga region of Shorne. There were three stairways leading to the

rooms above, seldom used because of the central shaft housing a lift that gave access both up and down.

Puzzled by the silence and the absence of anyone to meet him, and also possibly warned by some inner intuition learned from the Groil, Phrix, Shale hesitated by the lift and looked about him. There was a large stone table and stone chair by one of the green stone windows. On it, a newspaper caught his eye. He walked over and picked it up. It was thin, badly produced on cheap newsprint and the newsads were laughable in their crass naïveté. It was a copy of the *Gromwold Times and Echo*. Hardly the reading matter for Metita, in the unlikely event that Metita could read. From somewhere up above came a sudden peal of young girlish laughter and from somewhere down below, an odd strangled cry. He had never known what was below the house nor why the lift gave access to it. He was suddenly vaguely aware that without Phrix there were very few things he knew anything about; without his usual bodyguard, he was as vulnerable as a sheep straying out of range of its auto hoverdog. An archexecutive protected himself against everything except a mistress. It was virtually impossible, as anyone who has tried to make love in a bulletproof vest must know. And even that afforded no absolute protection. There was always some vital organ exposed to a sudden, treacherous attack. He was relieved when the communicator in his vest pocket buzzed. Phrix on Gromwold.

“Delay of ten minutes due to relative positions Shorne-Gromwold. No time for reply. You are trapped. Team from *Times and Echo*. Building surrounded. Do not trust Metita. Escape at once. Phrix.”

It was all very well to say “Escape at once,” but the marble slab door was closed and both walls and windows were solid stone blocks. He wondered why the Laboratory Director needed a house like a fortress.

“Metital” he called.

She or her family or servants must know of his arrival. There would be camera eyes on the door and—even in the absence of the occupants—there would be a built-in voice to tell the visitor what he or she should do. “Wait!” “Beat it!” “Drop dead!” “For all surveys our position should be registered firmly with the majority.” But there was no voice—only silence. He walked over to the elevator and the doors opened. He hesitated. Once inside, there could be no turning back. They could take him wherever they wanted him. The top floor, most likely, where the bottom would fall out at the touch of a button. He drew his pistol and began to climb the stairs. He had never had occasion to climb stairs

before and he was impressed with the skill of their construction, changing direction as they did at every landing so that you went on going up with only fluctuations to left and right of the vertical. The stairs themselves were solid blocks of translucent white stone, like quartz, and the solid balustrades were green marble. At every landing there were sliding green marble doors, but they were closed and unyielding to his thrust.

As he began to climb the fifth flight, he heard a soft, whirring noise and the green panel above began to slowly open and there, standing in the doorway against a great blaze of multicolored lights, was Metita. She wore a diaphanous robe and little else. Her arms were outstretched in welcome. Undulating. Yellow hair falling about her shoulders and halfway down her back. Long scarlet fingernails. Sharp, green teeth. Damn Phrix. She was alone, unarmed and eminently desirable. He had had a long flight. She was swaying forward with those long fingers beckoning. How infallible was intuition? Phrix was invariably right. That was why he was a menial and paid to advise. But he felt no emotions. Could he advise anyone emotionally? No, he could not. What did Phrix know of these soft fingers around his neck, slipping down his arm, his hand, his gun, taking his gun away. The soft, scented breath whispering, "You are home now, with Metita. With Metita you need no weapons." Just the same, a Groil voice could be insiduously persuasive. At a distance of ten minutes and through the distortion of a communicator, in short Groil sentences, Phrix's voice had carried a note of urgency. To believe or not to believe? He did not want to doubt Metita. Sharp nails caressing the hair behind his ears, drawing him into the room with the bright lights, crooning to him with the short staccato sentences of a mother to her child. "Baby Bunting was allergic, to any acid but lysergic." There was something psychedelic about the lights and unaccustomed angles; the floor and the wall had changed places and the roof was somewhere faraway below. Even so, he was aware that the door behind him was closing and that there were others in the room; he could see their faces in distorting mirrors and all around him he could hear their exaggerated breathing and the thumping of their heartbeats. He knew where he was. This was Metita's own woo-room, constructed for her by her scientifically-orientated father for extended satisfaction, a drawing-out and cross-fertilization of all the senses. He was not sure why there were other men in the room, upside-down images of *Times and Echo* comedians with hatchets in their hands.

"Come," her voice said. "Let us wrap ourselves in a scarlet blanket and float away into the sunset."

Phrix's voice came through the communicator, intuitive with a fine sense of timing. "Now is the time for flight."

Shale turned his head against the pressure of her restraining fingers in time to see, high-lights and low-lights reversed like a photographic negative, a host of yellow-eyed Salumi girls bearing down on him like Valkyries through a thundercloud. He ducked and dived for the point where the door should have been, only to realize that this was, in a psychedelic atmosphere, the exact opposite of the true direction. His head did however make contact with the wall, giving him at least something to hold on to. Keeping in mind that where the ceiling appeared to be, there was the floor, he followed the wall around, bounding rapidly with a sideward motion, like a crab. From all around him came the sound of screaming, the Salumi girls ululating and Metita calling in a low, musical contralto, "Shay-hale! Shay-hale!" There was a hand with long diamond nails dug into the calf of his leg and something sharp—it may have been another fingernail—exploring his neck, probably looking for the carotid. He kicked backward savagely and then remembered it should have been forward and kicked again. He caught his head on a protuberance. It seemed that you entered it from underneath and then spiraled up into darkness. It appeared not to be the door, but whatever it was, he chose it in preference to a room full of Salumis. Diving upward, he fell downward and then gravity took over. He was vaguely aware, before the darkness closed about him, that someone was shooting with an energy pistol and there were holes appearing in the floor and ceiling at the opposite side of the room to himself, indicating that someone was shooting at him. But now he seemed to be safe. He was falling down a dark tube narrow enough that he could control his speed of descent by thrusting outward with his elbows, and he was clear of the mind-confusion in the woo-room.

Metita's voice came drifting downward: "Archexecutive," she cooed. There was another voice, harsh and angry. He had heard that voice before somewhere. Kantor of the *Times and Echo*. "Where is he?" Kantor was shouting. "Where'd the barstard go?" "Down the waste-disposal chute," Metita tinkled in answer.

So that's where I am, Shale thought. He continued sliding rapidly for a considerable distance as there was obviously no time to lose. The only reason that Kantor had not yet fired down the pipe after him was probably that he was having difficulty in locating the aperture. Firing upward

when he should have fired downward, or inward instead of outward. He would get it right shortly, or Metita would switch off the psychedelic gas or whatever it was and they would see themselves clearly and face-to-face. It was a remarkably long pipe. It seemed he traveled half a kilometer before it ended and he was disgorged on to a concrete floor in a pile of kitchen scraps. "I've arrived," he said.

He was in an enclosure, three walls and a barred frontage like a lion's cage. At the back of the enclosure was a small dog-kennel-shaped hut and at the entrance to the hut a creature was squatting. A creature that Shale, after some reflection, identified as a man. Long-haired, long-bearded, indescribably dirty and quite naked, but still a man. He turned his head slowly and stared at Shale with deep, sunken apathetic eyes for the space of half a minute. Then he snarled with approximately the laryngeal resonance of a sulky tiger. Otherwise, he made no movement. He looked at Shale and Shale looked at him. Slowly, the significance of the man and the cage began to dawn on Shale together with a realization of where he was. He raised his eyes slowly to the notice above the dog-kennel.

"Exhibit 131," he read. "The subject is conditioned to eat when the red light shows. Note transference of response from Stimulus A—the light—to Stimulus B—the food. See notes. Students are warned against pressing the light button too frequently and overfeeding the subject. *It is dangerous to cross the barrier.*"

"Can you speak?" Shale asked. The subject responded with a few gibbering sounds and relapsed again into silence, staring at his feet. The cage grille was of some tough, impervious material and there was a heavy lock on the gate. As Shale examined it carefully, he heard a slobbering sound behind him. Exhibit 131 was allowed water whenever he wished and he was lapping loudly from his bucket. He shook his beard dry afterward and settled down to search the strands for lice.

"I can speak!" It was a voice from the next enclosure. A hand was stretched from behind the dividing wall, calling attention to its presence by waving up and down. It was a thin, pale, tiny hand, like a child's, and it was opening and closing spasmodically.

"Who are you?" Shale called, afraid to move for fear of disturbing Exhibit 131 and perhaps provoking him to violence.

"Exhibit 130. I am conditioned to press the red light button at four hourly intervals to feed 131 in the absence of the keeper or of visitors."

"Don't press it!" Shale called, alarmed at the prospect of being found on a pile of what was no doubt the subject's food.

"Don't worry!" Exhibit 130 told him. "I have to press it at the correct time; it is part of my conditioning and nothing you might say will alter that—but there is still some time before I need respond."

"Are you a man or woman?" Shale asked.

"Oh! I am a man," the subject answered proudly. "It is very simple to condition women to press buttons at scheduled periods. To correctly condition men is much more difficult. It is one of the things I demonstrate, the breakthrough in male worker-response by bio-chemical control. Is there anything I can do for you, as you appear to be unintentionally incarcerated?"

"How can I get out of here?" Shale asked.

"Is he coming for you?"

"Who?"

"The keeper, of course. You shouldn't be here. He will feed you to the anthropophagi."

"Who are they?"

"The cannibals, of course. Are you ignorant?"

"Yes," Shale confessed. "How do I get out of here?"

"I have a high I.Q.," the voice told him. "I have been especially bred for my I.Q. It is done by playing with the chromosome. You break down the chain and insert the chemical factors that generate intelligence. I have inherited my I.Q. from a reconstituted chromosome."

"Then put it to good use and tell me the way out!"

"For me there is no way out. I am happy only in conforming to the stimulus-response sequence of my conditioning. My I.Q. was fostered for experimental purposes only; it is irrelevant to the business of depressing my button. This button is my whole life. I should be miserable outside my cell."

"What about me?" Shale asked. "I'm conditioned to the world outside. Wine, women, travel, debauchery. Power and the satisfaction of my job well done. The manipulation of an apt cliché; the drum beat of words in the sonority of the sort of slogan that stops you in your tracks; the siren-blast of a newsad, properly positioned where the eye just can't fail to see it. That's life, that's living and that's me. . . . I'm an archexecutive," he explained.

"Ah!" the voice agreed. "Then you must return to the world outside. I will give the matter of your escape my undivided attention."

A door clanged in the distance and heavy footsteps crunched steadily along the echoing corridors. It would

obviously be only a matter of time before Metita came for him, for reasons of her own, or her father decided to keep him where he was. As research director, he was probably short of specimens arriving voluntarily and without previous conditioning.

"Hurry!" he begged.

"You could kill 131 and take his place," 130 suggested.

"It wouldn't work. I am unarmed and I am not at all sure I could kill him. He would more likely kill me. Besides, I couldn't impersonate him. He is naked and hairy and I am clean and shaven."

"I, too, am conditioned to shave."

"Hurry!" *If only Phrix were here*, he thought. *Phrix would think of something; it was his job*. Phrix could afford to laugh at this specimen's I.Q. His own was immeasurable by Ruling Race standards.

It was difficult to tell where exactly the footsteps were, because of the echo, but they were louder and thus certainly nearer. *Clang! Crunch! Clang! Crunch!* There was a general whining and wailing, as though other specimens were voicing their fear of the keeper's approach. What sort of I.Q. had this white-haired creature anyway? Still no ideas and the footsteps ringing now with the suggestion of hobnails on a metal road. The indignity of being found squatting on a pile of garbage in some subhuman creature's cage was too much for Shale. Oblivious of 131's warning growls, he ran to the dividing wall and thumped on it with his fists.

"I.Q.?" he shouted. "You haven't got an I.Q.! You're just a blob of protoplasm! All you can do is press a button. You've no more I.Q. than all the rest of our menials. That's all any of them could ever do—press buttons!"

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"I have arrived at a solution," 130 told him primly, choosing to ignore the outburst. "You will conceal yourself inside 131's kennel, arming yourself with whatever comes to hand. Conceal all garbage also within the kennel. Ignore 131. Without the correct stimulus, he will not respond. When the keeper enters the cage, which he will do, believing you to be there, I shall depress the red button. It will call for considerable effort on my part, as the four hour period is not yet over, but with concentration I shall succeed. 131 is conditioned to eat when the red light glows. He must do so—it is compulsion. He is not at all selective."

"You mean . . . ?"

"In the absence of his usual garbage, he will eat the keeper."

“Brilliant!”

What a brain the man had! Phrix could have done no better himself, for all his tri-phrenic thinking. Shale gathered up the kitchen scraps, an armful at a time, and carried them into the kennel. Apart from an occasional whimper, Exhibit 131 ignored him. He had tidied up the last morsel and had dived inside the kennel only a moment before the keeper appeared.

“You can come out,” the keeper called. “I know you’re in there and the management wants you back upstairs.”

Shale did not answer. He lay flat on his stomach behind the pile of garbage. Through the door, he could just see the gate and the keeper’s hand on the padlock. The keeper waited a moment and then called again. “You might as well come out,” he said. “Unless you want to spend the rest of your life in there with 131.” Shale still did not answer, but he began to see a flaw in 130’s strategy. What if, instead of coming inside to fetch him, the keeper merely went away and left him there against some future occasion when he might be useful? But Shale need not have worried. After a pause, the keeper opened the padlock with one of a large bunch of keys dangling from his belt and, opening the gate, he entered the cage. At the same time, a hand from the adjacent cell curled through the bars and depressed the “Animate 131” button. Exhibit 131 came suddenly to life. He leaped to his feet, bounded to the accustomed place below the garbage chute, and, finding the expected heap of food scraps no longer there, he paused for a moment, puzzled and confused. Then, confirming the infallibility of high I.Q. predictions, he sprang at the keeper with a flurry of teeth and claw-like nails. It was hard to believe that this was neither more nor less than a normal specimen of the human race, behaving no more and no less than in the manner it had been taught to behave. It was all over in a matter of minutes. Reasoned defense was powerless against determined conditioning and the keeper went down as pitifully as a stag with the hounds at its throat. Shale closed the gate carefully behind him as Exhibit 131 munched happily at an arm bared from a blue-uniformed sleeve.

“It worked,” Exhibit 130 announced, mildly satisfied. He was a bare eighty centimeters tall, pale and wizened. He sat on a high stool in a narrow cell. The high stool allowed him to reach the “Animate 131” button, which was his sole occupation. It seemed a shameful waste of a good I.Q. rating, but now, due to the breakthrough with the chromosome structure, I.Q.’s could be ten a cent for those that wanted them for future breeding. Few took advantage of the pos-

sibility. Children with a higher I.Q. than their parents are always a source of embarrassment.

"Are you sure you don't want to get out?" Shale asked. "I can let you free if you like; I've got the keeper's keys."

"Oh! My goodness me, no!" the exhibit replied. "What should I do without my red button? No, you go wherever you have to go and do what you have to do. You will never be really happy because you can't be sure what it is you want. You have to wrangle with choice. Free will only breeds neurosis and it is ninety-nine percent an illusion anyway. My reactions are inevitable. I am, and can only be, happy."

"Can you do one more thing," Shale asked, "and tell me the way out of here?"

"As far as I know," the exhibit replied, "there is no way out. It is only because of my unique conditioning and the store of knowledge I have been able to amass, that I am aware that there is a world at all outside the laboratory. It goes on for miles—the laboratory, I mean—practically for ever."

"The keeper must get out," Shale protested. "Or used to get out before 131 ate him."

"The keeper is somewhat unique," 130 considered. "He appears to be a link between the world of the laboratory and that part of the scheme of things that lies between the end of the laboratory and infinity. I always looked on the keeper as being analogous to god."

"There's not much left of him now," Shale said, looking back to where 131 was gnawing happily among a mess of blood, bones and gold-braided uniform.

"There was a period of development in most worlds when the acolytes sought divinity by devouring the god. Who eats the god becomes god. Who eats the keeper becomes in a way his own keeper. We are here only putting to test the significance of past ritual," 130 propounded. He appeared to be on the brink of a lecture and Shale, hearing voices in the distance, was in no mood to listen. Neither 130 nor his opinions on theology were of any interest once he had served his purpose. "I must find a way out," he said.

"If you continue in a straight line," 130 advised him, "you must logically reach somewhere in the end. But take care! It is possible that the laboratory, like the universe, is curved and what appears to be a straight line may return you again to the beginning."

It was clear that 130's chemically inbred intelligence was finding its outlet, having for once the luxury of an audience, in abstruse philosophizing rather than in the practicalities

of the organism's manipulation of its environment. He had adjusted himself to a very small area of environment and had no conception of manipulation. Even in the rescue of Shale, his manipulation had gone no further than the depression of his usual button, although at an admittedly unscheduled hour. The break with schedule had probably been the greatest single effort of his life. Shale left him sitting rather owlshly on his stool, the thought processes showing clearly in the creasing of his wizened forehead.

Shale stopped to listen and to consider the right course of action. There were voices apparently echoing from several directions at once. The roof of the laboratory, which appeared to be underground, was low and extremely resonant. The passage in which he found himself was extremely dimly lit and it was impossible to tell where it might lead whichever direction he took. On either side were the grilles of cages similar to the one he had just left and there seemed nothing he could do but follow 130's advice and keep going in a straight line until something happened. He set off, as far as he could tell, in the opposite direction to the main area of noise, noting as he ran that the exhibit numbers on the cages were increasing and concluding from this observation that he was probably heading away from the main entrance, where the pursuit would most likely come from. The corridor was apparently a main thoroughfare. Other passages branched off to left and to right, all in semi-darkness, identical with each other. There were barred cages on either side, with spotlights inside the cages illuminating points of interest and the show-cards. None of the specimens seemed to take any notice of him; they went on doing the things they were bred to do, proving the anthropological points they were designed to prove, oblivious of all else. Probably those that could speak were used to students and visitors and spoke only when spoken to and said the things they were there to say.

Shale took out his pocket communicator and sent a message to Phrix on Gromwold, telling him of his predicament with instructions to contact the Publisher's P.A. and to buy up the *Times and Echo*, or arrange for its presses to be sabotaged, whichever was the most expedient. He had barely finished the message with the reflection that it would take twenty minutes for a reply to reach him, when he heard the voices again, much nearer and approaching from one of the side corridors. Because the echo made it so difficult to tell how many were looking for him and from which direction they were coming, he couldn't decide which

way to try his escape. The obvious solution was to hide and study, the problem was—where?

He was now in a section apparently devoted to the study of blindness, where the show-cards announced the year and method of blinding and the skills the specimens had subsequently mastered, demonstrated generally by their ability to find their way through various complicated mazes. The drill was constructed with food at the center of a labyrinth—find it, and you eat. Fail, and you starve. "Life," the cards announced, "is like that." Once the specimen had mastered his labyrinth and could run the gauntlet of its hazards to the satisfaction of the lecturers and students, the obstacles were changed, trip wires were inserted and heavy lead balls hanging at head height were arranged, where previously the run had been clear. The specimen, being first well-starved, was then let loose and the time taken to relearn the route, together with injuries received, was noted. Quotients of adaptability were thus established and the whole gamut of human understanding was increased. "Man," the final notice read, "is infinitely adaptable."

Shale, armed with the keeper's keys, hesitated. It would be simple to let himself into one of the cages, but not so simple to impersonate one of the hairy, naked and wild-looking inmates. He could, of course, hide in one of the labyrinths, but what of the occupant? Would he, like Exhibit 131, eat anything that came his way in an otherwise uneatable environment? Would these blinded and sometimes also deafened specimens harbor a grudge against the sighted members of their own race coming temporarily within their power? The keeper of course would carry a whip, if he ever went in the cages at all. Shale had no whip and was suffering from the acute, naked embarrassment of being unarmed. No. The cages of the blind were not for him. Where then? Looming out of the dim light ahead was a large notice swung across the width of the corridor: **NEW EXPERIMENTAL SECTION—Advanced students only.**

Below the notice there was a barrier of light, transparent lumitex and a gate, closed and unyielding, but with no lock or visible catch. "Identify yourself!" a metallic voice ordered. "State seniority and reasons for entry."

"The keeper," Shale announced, "and that's reason enough."

Surprisingly, the gate opened, responding apparently to voice alone with no visual check, unless it accepted the rattle of the keeper's keys as sufficient evidence that the holder was, in fact, the keeper. It was just as well. The voices were now no further away than the next turning and their owners might at any moment come into view. Once

through the barrier, the first thing Shale noticed was an empty cell, only a short distance from the entrance and next door to the one labeled, "Effects of gorilla gonadine injections on the mating approach. Mating will take place Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 1500 hours. Students should be in their places by 1450. Care should be taken not to disturb the specimens." The keeper's key fitted the lock to the empty cell and Shale had just time to close the gates behind him and to conceal himself inside the kennel structure common to most of the enclosures, when a party of students, conducted by a white-coated lecturer, arrived outside.

"This," the lecturer announced, marshaling his charges in front of the opposite enclosure, "is an experiment of deep fundamental interest to all students of anthropology. You will notice the enclosure is divided down the center. In the left-hand cage, we have a female Homo sapiens, in fact, of distant Salumi parentage, but that is irrelevant. Homo sapiens, for the purposes of our investigations, is treated as a single race or species. Our subject is thirteen years old. Puberty is reached. In the right-hand section, we have a male Homo sapiens of the same age. You will notice that in front of the bars we have panels of one-way visual plastic, known as see-throughs. We are thus able to study our subjects without their being aware of our scrutiny. Neither of these subjects has ever seen another creature and no attempt has been made to condition them in any way. They are, in fact, as nature made them, and presumably intended that they should be, isolated from distracting forces and modes of social or tribal conduct. It is only in such laboratory conditions that it is possible to ascertain what is inherent in the specimen itself as distinct from group and environmental influences. In the natural state, no species is able to exist entirely on its own; it is dependent on its parents for food and protection and is later subject to the influences of competition with others of its own age. Our specimens here are fed and watered and their cells are cleaned by automatic processes imported from Gromwold. They are thus both, I repeat, exactly as nature intended that they should be. The object of the experiment is to demonstrate the mating techniques that are the basis of many of our social customs. You will note that similar techniques are common to many animals. Pheasants, swans, stags and some species of crab. Since the experiment can be performed once only with each pair of specimens, who will afterward have served their usefulness and be suitably disposed of, you will realize why this section is reserved for advanced students only. I will

now operate the mechanism drawing aside the sliding door between the cells and you will observe carefully and notes will be taken."

He pressed a button and the dividing doors slid back between the two enclosures. The first reaction of the two specimens, now for the first time confronted with another of their species, was one of fear. From the seclusion of his kennel Shale noted both male and female specimens giving voice to strangled, inarticulate cries and cowering against the opposing walls of their cells. Gradually, curiosity overcame fear and the male approached the female. Cautiously at first, shambling from side to side, poking at her occasionally with his finger. She snapped at his hand. He turned away and sat with his back to her, giving an occasional whine. Slowly, she edged from one end of her wall to the other and then, clawing the air with her hands and grimacing, lips drawn back and baring her teeth, she left the protection of her own territory and advanced toward him, one step at a time. He looked quickly over his shoulder and she responded with a warning grunt. He turned and faced her on all fours and she fled to a corner, upright, but leaning forward like an ape. There must, Shale thought, have been some stimulus from the feeding machines to have inspired an upright posture, or the ability to assume one. The climbing up on to the two feet is imitative. It is doubtful if any human child would do so left to its own devices and without some external influence, such as food above a certain level. Even so, the male seemed happier on his knees. He could move surprisingly quickly on all fours.

The approach and retreat technique continued for some time and then she allowed him to come closer. He was becoming frustrated and angry. Flecks of foam formed at the corners of his mouth. As he snarled, she turned her back on him and he suddenly sprang at her, biting and scratching. She did her best to fight him off, but he was considerably the stronger. In a moment he had dragged her to the ground and strangled her. When he found she no longer moved, he jumped up and down on the broken body shouting hoarse cries of obvious triumph.

"You never can tell," the lecturer regretted. "Good specimens, carefully bred for years, can prove quite useless at times. If this result proves anything at all, it is only how immensely varied is the mind of man and its responses to its environment. Usually the result of this experiment is as one would expect. The sexual instinct takes over and dominates the lust for power and the more basic dread of the unknown. But sometimes, as you see, this happens. It may

give you grounds for reflection, whether the sexual instinct is in fact the prime motivater of our mental mechanisms, or whether the lust for power and the survival factor are not equally dominant. After many thousands of years of experiment, we have still not arrived at a basic conclusion. The prime motivating element or elements still elude us."

The students made rapid notes in their pocket recorders and gathered around the cell taking photographs.

"We shall soon see the motivating factor in this one case," the lecturer continued, "If he eats her, it will indicate the quest for survival and suggest nothing more basic than the likelihood that he was hungry. If he does not eat her and continues to evince signs of triumph and satisfaction, it will, of course, indicate a functioning of the ancient lust for power."

The exhibit did not eat his female counterpart. He became restive, sniffing and prodding at the inert body, wailing and hopping from foot to foot. Finally, he sat beside her and gave voice to an agonizing howl of utter despair, like a wolf crying to the moon.

"Neurosis," the lecturer diagnosed. "The sexual factor is at last beginning to dominate. He is confused and unhappy only because he does not know what it is. He will ravage her in due course, but we cannot wait for that. It may take some time and we have much more to see."

The students dawdled for a moment or two, hoping to see the sexual factor exert itself, but the lecturer hurried on and the exhibit continued to bite his nails and whine. It is the disadvantage of crash courses that the students see too much at once and have no time to dwell on subjects that could be both rewarding and conducive to a better understanding of the universe and its peoples.

"Why is this cell empty?" one of the students asked, pointing to where Shale lay in mortal terror inside the kennel.

"Yes, what about this cell?" the others asked, hoping by this means to spin out the time a little. "Why is it empty?"

"It is not empty," the lecturer announced. "It only appears to be so. The cell contains one of the most remarkable achievements of the laboratory to date. In an enclosure behind a concealed panel at the rear is one of the most successful female hybrids ever raised in captivity."

"Holy Asgard!" Shale groaned.

"Are hybrids actually possible, then?" someone asked. "Assuming you are referring to man and ape, I had understood that such a cross was a biological impossibility."

"I must refer you to the works of Karkoff." The lecturer frowned. "Karkoff, as you know, or should know, carried

out some remarkable experiments on the chromosome. Apart from isolating the genetic factors that control heredity and reproducing the whole complicated chain in the laboratory, he also established the existence of what he termed the element of rejection. Quoting from Karkoff's *Hybridization and Chromosome Synthesis*, which should be recommended reading in any university on any planet: "There is no chemical reason why any animal cannot be inseminated with the semen of another species. On purely bio-chemical grounds, all hybrids are possible. In many cases of cross fertilization in the past, however, the experiment has failed because of an inhibiting factor in the chromosome which acts like a catalyst in reverse. This anti-catalytic factor I term, *the element of rejection*. Remove it from the chromosome and any crossbreeding becomes possible. Any spermatozoa will attack any ovum, break off and leave within it chromosomes we have artificially reconstituted or from which we have removed the inhibiting factor—the element of rejection."

There was a subdued hum of voices as the students dictated in their notebooks. The lecturer sighed. Advanced students should have been aware of Karkoff's findings. The standard of general education, he had long noticed, was declining. The young were less well-informed and less receptive to information than their fathers had been. The universe was fast going to the dogs.

"The particular hybrid we have here concealed," he continued, regretfully aware that silk purses would never be made out of sow's ears, let the universe advance in general understanding with its customary strides however far it might. "The hybrid we have here concealed, we have educated to university standard entirely by machine teachers. She has never yet seen another person nor anything outside the four walls of her enclosure. We are keeping the outside area free for a suitable mate as we intend to breed hybrid with hybrid and produce, we hope, a completely new and chemically perfect strain. It is part of the experiment that she will not be let loose before one is bred."

"Why?" a student asked.

"Why what?" The lecturer frowned.

"Why breed your hybrid in seclusion? What is to be gained by this?"

The lecturer removed his spectacles and wiped them carefully on his coat sleeve.

"I trust," he asked with silky sarcasm, "you are not about to inform us we have been wrong in this? The tail is about to wag the dog, is it not?"

"Not at all," the student protested. "I just wondered, that's all."

"You will all," the lecturer directed, "confine your wonderings to matters about which I direct your, albeit limited, faculties of wonderment. I have prepared my lecture and have no intention of being diverted from an exposition of the knowledge I have acquired into a debate on other matters about which I have had no reason to study. We will continue."

"Couldn't we just see her?" a student asked.

"I will activate the mechanism that will open the door to her inner chamber," the lecturer agreed. "It is, after all, approaching the time when she should be presented to the outside world. It will doubtless be some while before she emerges into what must be, to her, a strange and frightening environment. Nevertheless, she will certainly ultimately emerge. We will pass this way on our return, when you may all see her and photographs may be taken. Now, I would like you to follow me to Exhibit 1049. An ordinary maze. The subject, male *Homo sapiens*, has learned the secret of the labyrinth and can reach without difficulty food placed at its center. How does he remember the left and right turns, the complexities of the passages? Is this memory, as we might imagine in a rational, thinking creature? Or do the motor muscles of his legs that carry him through these intricacies also play a part? In other words, is the memory a photographic picture in the brain, for the subject has not learned to speak and to say to himself, 'Here I turn right.' Or is it a muscle-memory, a coordination of stimuli that move the legs in a certain way at a certain time? To establish this point, we have amputated the subject's legs and arms. Now, you will observe that, as I press the siren that informs him that the food is there, he wriggles on his stomach, taking the right course as surely as before. Ergo, the memory was contained in the brain cells in the form of a directive sense rather than a stimulation of certain motor muscles, even though the memory itself was nonverbal and contained, like a photographic plate, in chemical but nonetheless pictorial form."

The entourage moved on and Shale emerged cautiously from his kennel, blinking away the retinal images generated by staring at the lights in the opposing cages. As his vision cleared, he found himself face to face with what appeared to be a tall and rather stately chimpanzee.

III

THEY STARED at each other, both unmoving, for some little time, Shale and the ape-woman. Shale because he was unarmed and had no means of knowing how they stood, strength for strength, being both about the same height, and the ape-woman because she had never seen another person before and needed time for reflection.

"I'm Marylin," she said at last. "You, I think, must be God."

"No," he said, backing cautiously away toward the door. "I am Shale. Just ignore me; I'm on my way."

"A person?" she asked. "Like myself?"

"Somewhat." He hesitated, remembering the fight to the death when the male and female in the opposite cage had found themselves, for the first time, not alone in the world. How far would education by machine sublimate such basic instincts? It would depend no doubt on what it was the machines had taught.

"You are not a person like myself?" Her voice was cultured like a Groil's, or even more, like one expected P.A. men to speak to each other on Asgard. Nothing puts a menial in his place better than the right accent. He had never heard a girl with a cultured voice before.

"You are a little different," he said cautiously. "You are a . . ." Did she know she was half ape? Did she know what apes were? Did she know what men were, if it came to that? What exactly did "University standard" mean? How much could anyone learn entirely from descriptions of things not seem?

"I imagined that persons would look like you," she said. "Although I had expected more hair. On the other hand, I had believed it was my destiny to be bred alone. I thought that only God could alter the course of destiny. I thus naturally assumed that you were He."

I assumed that you were He. The verb to be takes the nominative. The sort of thing a machine-teacher would insist upon, even though the Ruling Races had been saying "It's me" for twenty millennia.

"There is no God," he said. "It's an ancient fable."

"If you are not God, how do you know that? I thought only God knew everything and therefore only God could know that there is no God?" The machines appeared to have provided her with an answer to everything even if this particular piece of logic was no more than nonsense. Or was it? It is always debatable, he thought, the question of

what is logic and what isn't. An advertisement manager should never allow himself to be out-talked by anyone, least of all by a hybrid ape.

"The Publisher knows everything," he said.

"Possibly the Publisher is God," she said. "God has had many names. I have often thought I would like to write my memoirs. The machines said I had a good literary style. I would like to meet the Publisher."

"No one meets the Publisher," he told her, embarrassed at the unethical nature of the thought. "The Publisher works through me. I am the Advertisement Manager."

"He moves in a mysterious way," she quoted. "His wonders to perform."

"I have to get out of here," he told her. "This is your cell and they will be coming back to have a look at you shortly. I belong to the world outside. If you don't mind, I'll say goodbye and be on my way."

"I'll come with you," she said. "I've always wanted to see it. The world outside, I mean."

"You can hardly do that!"

"Why not?"

Why not? Well—why not? It was going to be difficult enough to get out anyway. Having a chimpanzee with a college accent wouldn't really make any difference. It would really put one over on Metita and her father to walk off with their exhibit. It wasn't only that, the desire to pay off Metita. He felt an odd liking for this strange, subhuman specimen and a peculiar feeling that he would like to help her. Shale was not given to volunteering help to anyone. The world didn't work that way. People were all potential enemies. You met them as such, got the upper hand at the first opportunity and pushed them down before they pushed you. But inexperienced hybrids were different. They wouldn't know how to push. She looked rather pathetic, standing there all hairy and naked and twiddling her fingers. Also, there was status in owning anyone with a college accent.

"Come along," he said. "I expect we'll find you a job in the organization somewhere."

She might also have news value. As Advertisement Manager, he knew very little about news, but you needed it to weave into the text of the advertisement. Phrix would know about that. They might even bring a piece about her and blackmail Metita's father into advertising the laboratories, which he never did normally. It would be something to actually increase the revenue. He hadn't done anything like that for years. The communicator buzzed in his pocket. Phrix returning his signal.

"On way to Shorne with squad of Gromwold police. Large sum credited to chief constable. Other publications conspiring with *Time and Echo*. Minor attack on Publisher's authority. *Times and Echo* works well guarded. Need reinforcements. Where are you? Phrix."

"In some kind of laboratory under Lulonga. Metita's father is director. Metita's in league with *Times and Echo*. Forbid you to say, 'I told you so.' Get him—Metita's father! Get her tool Signal Asgard for reinforcements. I shall escape and meet you at Lulonga airport. Have with me a . . ." He was going to say "chimpanzee" but, doubtful of Marylin's sensitivity or knowledge of her antecedents, he refrained and substituted "girl."

"Have you a mirror?" Marylin asked. "I have never seen myself. Now that I have seen you and I know what people look like, I am wondering. Do I look at all like you?"

She looked at her hands, turning them over, palms upward and back again. They were human hands but very hairy. Doubtfully, Shale found her a mirror in his smock pocket and handed it to her. She studied her face thoughtfully. It was quite a human face, really, Shale thought. True, it was wrinkled like a chimpanzee's, the eyes were deep-set, the mouth overlarge and the lower lip protruding, but it was, in a way, a likable, attractive face.

"Yes," she said, after a while. "I thought I looked like that. I know it from the feel. You are different, but I find you quite handsome. It's funny, but I've always had an impression of faces from what I have heard about their character. The machines were very exact. What do you think of me? Would you call me—pretty?"

Normally, Shale would have laughed at any woman who, with a face like that, asked such a damn fool question. With any other face for that matter. After all, Advertisement Managers can expect the best in compliments from their brides; there is little point in handing out courtesies in return. Just the same, this time, he did not laugh. The absence of his normal sense of humor puzzled him. Why did he care if a hybrid's feelings were hurt? But he did care. He had begun to like Marylin and it was a new sensation. He had never liked any man or woman before. But then, Marylin was not a woman. Not in the ordinary sense, at least.

"Yes," he said, in answer to her question, "quite pretty. Now, let's get out of here."

They unlocked the outer cage gates and hurried in the opposite direction from the way the lecturer and his party had taken, first closing the gates behind them to leave a mystery for the lecturer, and ultimately the management,

to think about. "The case of the vanishing hybrid—did Karkoff supply all the answers?"

"The last advice I had," Shale said, "was to keep straight on until I came to the end."

"It seems reasonable," she agreed.

"We must get you some clothes," he said, ignoring a thin arm stretched through the bars of a cage labeled, EFFECTS OF STARVATION—DO NOT FEED THE SPECIMENS. Marilyn stopped and, for some reason best known to herself, held the hand for a moment before rejoining Shale.

"I wish we had some food for him," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because he's hungry."

"So what?" He was striding along so fast she had to scamper to keep up with him. She took his smock-tails and pulled. "Shale!" she said. He stopped and looked at her curiously. Her mouth was half open and you half expected a long tongue to shoot out of it, like a frog swatting a passing fly. But she seemed more alive, more concerned about life than a phlegmatic toad.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Doesn't anyone care?" she asked. "Doesn't anyone feel hunger when someone else's stomach is empty?"

"What an ideal!" He laughed. A droll toad. A comical monkey with its whiskers twitching and their ends a little wet.

"There's a word for it," she said, turning her memory-boxes inside out and finding it in a neglected corner: "Empathy," she said.

"I don't know a lot about words," he grumbled. "That's always the editor's job. I just know about life and running a business, which is what life is all about. If I haven't any food, I'm hungry, or I expect I should be. If someone else hasn't any food, I expect he's hungry too. That's his concern, not mine. There's a lot of people in the universe, far too many for me to bother about whether they live or die. There's only one Archexecutive Shale. I know all about him and I'm taking good care he never wants. You don't mean to tell me you care if some creature you never knew was there a moment ago dies of hunger in his cell? You're going to find life pretty miserable if that's your trouble. Anyway, what are we talking about food for? I was going to get you some clothes before you started blathering."

"Yes, I know you were." She was delighted. "I know about clothes, the things you are wearing. I've always wanted clothes. I've thought sometimes when I was alone in my cell, I shouldn't mind being cut off from the world

I'd learned about and knowing about all the things I'd never see, if I could have clothes and dress up sometimes and pretend there was someone coming who would be pleased because I looked nice. I knew I should feel quite different in a skirt. One does, you know."

"I'll get you clothes," he promised. "The best in the universe."

He didn't know why he said it, nor why he should care whether she dressed or not. She was an ape and nothing to him. Well, half an ape anyway. She slipped an arm around him and kissed him quickly behind the ear with a large mouth. Her lips were wet and leathery—but he hardly noticed.

"You can have all the clothes you want," he said. "And a hat. I'll throw in at least one hat."

IV

THE PUBLISHER'S P.A. lay dreamily on an inflated mattress, floating on the still waters of an Asgard lagoon. His hands dangled, languidly breaking the surface with the slow, circular motion of one finger. There were multicolored fish, deep down in the cool, clear depths of the blue-tinted water. You could see the bottom, fathoms down, clean white gravel and here and there, clumps of anemones, fronds of scarlet and purple reeds, phosphorescent lagoon-urchins, and the waving, glinting outline of scimitar fish upended, rooted on the hilts of their tails. The P.A.'s name was Mule and, in spite of regular hormone injections, he was showing signs of age and corpulence.

Once it had been thought that nothing should age on Asgard with everything there to keep it young. There were no seasons and thus no years—and without years, how should one age? Asgard itself, having no menstrual, annual, or perennial cycle that might have been attributed to an extra-galactic Persephone, did not age. There was no reason why men should do so either; there is nothing necessarily inherent about it. Tissues continue to replace themselves with other similar tissues and there is no reason at all why the body should show any sign of the continuing process. Nevertheless, Mule was aging.

Limsola floated beside him, fanning him every now and again with a water lily leaf. The Asgard temperature was constant at a happy medium between hot and cold, but it was still pleasant to be fanned, particularly by Limsola. Limsola had the figure of an Asgard Venus, though somewhat narrower about the hips. She had good bone structure and high cheekbones and soft, rounded curves in the right places.

There are, as every man knows and probably every woman too, curves and curves. Some mean nothing at all, implying no more and no less than the ability to run a mile in 3 minutes 25.6 seconds. Others are geometrically perfect but you never give them a second glance. But some . . . well, it's a matter of light and shade and suggestion of dimple and texture and tint and a promise of something that only such women have to offer that makes one's very male glands raise their leering heads like sea horses and neigh in a knowing throaty and aquamarine sort of way. And such were the curves of Limsola, as she lay, drifting, her breasts pointing pertly at the Asgard sky like ovoid funnels set laterally across the bows of a ship, while her navel gave access to some secret and miniature engine room. He noticed that her skin shone with a soft, translucent whiteness even under the blue sun of Asgard.

"Your breasts," he said, dreamily. She fanned them with the leaf. The warm air was a gentle caress and she smiled with the movement of it. "Like two igloos with a chimney on each," he said, proud of the simile.

"You've had your injection," she said, nodding. "I always know when you've had your injection."

Mule sighed. He liked to think love was emotional, irrational, the wild fire of blood in torment, rather than coldly and impersonally chemical. It was the same with all emotions. Were those generated from within, by the chemistry of the body, really any different from those sparked off by the synthetic chemistry of the capsule? They all felt the same. In any case, he was sadly aware that, without the sexual hormones, he was an aging and impotent chief executive, whom even Limsola, naked as a naiad, could never rouse to the exuberation of even a dry, querulous cough. But then again, what is impotence?—a matter of chemistry. Did it matter where the chemicals came from? Does the personality really own in a more personal way the laboratory that is inside itself, as something different and apart, than it does the stimulants that are just as much its property by virtue of material, if external, ownership? A chief executive is a chief executive both inside and out and the action of his thyroid is no different from the processes of the laboratories whose products he also controls. Just now, Mule had more on his mind than Limsola and the death of his glands. He dipped his fingers in the warm, clear water and allowed the drops to fall, one by one, on his forehead.

"I'm worried," he said. "It's the responsibility. You don't know what it's like to be responsible."

"Poor S.D.," she said, tickling his nose with the serrated edge of the leaf. "Tell Limsola!"

S.D.! he thought, sadly. Sugar Daddy. She had meant it as a term of endearment, but to Mule it was not endearing. It was an epitaph. Two letters that summed up the long drawn-out evening of his life and extinguished forever the vague memory of the fitful fever it might once have been. As P.A. to the Publisher, Mule could have his pick of all the women on Asgard and if they were not to his liking, he could have replacements imported at the drop of a cybernetic hint to the chief clerk. They were all there, imported from the furthest corners, from pivot to outer periphery, for their exceptional qualities. Only the ultimate heads of all the professions came to Asgard, or had come a long time ago. Mistresses were no exception. But Mule was now at the age, 350 or thereabouts, when chemistry could no longer maintain intellectual satisfaction. The body continued to replenish its tissues once the mechanism of aging was inhibited. He was invulnerable to all known diseases, including the B91. Emotionally he was elated, serene, expectant, merry or contemplative at the prick of a needle. Yet somewhere behind the emotions, the mechanical sense mechanism of the body, the intellect had slowly tired until it was no more concerned with even the stimulation of itself. It happened to everyone at some time or other. The needle is plied more and more irregularly, the little hormone tablet in the buttocks runs dry, the body fattens, ages, grows comatose and finally dies, for no better reason than that it has forgotten how to live.

"You should play more golf," she said, laying the water lily leaf on the jut of her pelvis for protection against the ultraviolet rays of the blue sun.

"Golf!" he said, with a dry, hollow irony. Golf might once have been fun before the electronic revolution—how many centuries ago? Certainly the ancients had considered it of prime mystical and socio-theological importance. No one made a deal with a non-golfer. But it had been different then. You walked on to the—what did they call them?—Links?—on your own two feet, wheeling or carrying your clubs. You applied yourself to the ball with a swing of the club, dexterously, with your own two hands. But now! You drive on to the simugrass with the auto-transporter. The ball is teed on the green by a pincer device in the undercarriage. You set the dials, read the range finder, wind velocity, elasticity of simuturf. Press! Ping! And back to the clubhouse for drinks all around. You holed in one every time.

"Tell me your worries, poor S.D." Limson yawned. "Has the Publisher found you out?"

"Good gracious, no!" He was amazed at her naïveté. "I never see the Publisher. The head of an empire does not interfere with the running of it. Ordinarily, I never interfere either. What is the point of being Chief Executive on Asgard if you dabble in the dreary universe outside? But now—well, it's different. It's that man Shale."

"The Advertisement Manager," she said brightly.

"Late Advertisement Manager, I think." He shook his head and speared testily with his finger at a passing sapphire fish. It yelped musically, splashing away in a flurry of threshing fins.

"Why?" she asked. "Is the revenue going down?"

"It's not the revenue," he said. "When you have a virtual monopoly, you don't worry about revenue. The auto-accountants on the central banking planet attend to that. The rates are automatically adjusted to balance the budget and transfer our contribution to the maintenance of Asgard. I never bother myself with trivialities like finance. No. It's Shale himself. I think he's expendable."

"Then expend him," she said.

The sapphire fish peered from behind a clump of golden-crowned bullrushes. It whistled a monotonous bi-tonal cuckoo refrain. There was a flash of multicolored plumage and an eagle swooped, carrying it aloft, still singing, in its talons.

"He's got himself into some sort of trouble," the P.A. confided. "Caught napping by a dreary one-planet paper no one has ever heard of. Now he wants reinforcements."

"Can you replace him?" she asked. "You never see any of the staff, do you?"

"Of course not!" He was shocked at the idea. "Higher Management never concerns itself with the squalid bickerings of executives and archexecutives. Normally Shale would choose his own successor in the unlikely event of his retiring before someone else supplanted him."

"How did he get the job in the first place?" she asked.

"Assassinations, I think," he grumbled. "I believe he jettisoned his predecessor in deep space. Shale climbed the ladder in the usual way, by a series of intrigues—amazing how naïve employees can be; they never notice they're being outmaneuvered until it's too late—and then, by some means, he prevailed upon the then Ad Manager to join him on a trip without his bodyguard. It was careless of him and of course in business, carelessness can never be tolerated. Shale had exposed his superior's weakness and presented himself

for appointment at the same time. Higher Management never questions legitimate manueveres of that nature."

"And now Shale has been careless himself?"

"It seems so. He is apparently in the hands of this small, unknown organization. Naturally I cannot allow the controlling advertisement archexecutive post to fall into the hands of a rival, however brilliantly the campaign was executed that put Shale in their hands."

"Then who will you appoint?"

"I think Shale's Groil. A humanoid called Phrix. He seems to have the situation well in hand."

"I thought Groils were unsuitable for posts of higher authority? Aren't they supposed to be too intelligent to care or something?"

"Ordinarily, yes," he agreed. "But Phrix seems to be exceptional. He is not looking for authority—Groils never do—but, nevertheless, appears to have assumed it. I was most impressed by his analysis of the situation. He appeared to regard Shale as a position rather than as a person and his grasp of the functions of that position was considerably better than Shale's. Shale, of course, never does anything, none of them do. These archexecutive functions are no more than the old offices of president and king and queen, member of Parliament, senator, congressman and oberbürgermeister. Something for the menial to aspire to be. Remove the rung at the top of the ladder and then the rung next to it and the one below that, and very soon you not only have no ladder and nothing for the human race to aspire to, but no human race, either, to do the aspiring. We all know it wouldn't matter whether there is a human race or not, but since there is, we like to think it has its uses."

"Anyway, I have signaled Phrix to assume that Shale is in fact liquidated by his rivals and to take over their organization and deal with them as he sees fit."

"I see," she said.

"It is a great responsibility." He sighed. "I shouldn't have to make these high-level decisions at my time of life."

"Every man is as young as his last injection," she quoted. "Shall we start the mini-motors and head for the shore?"

"I shall do my best to forget the cares of my office," he said, as the mattress sailed toward the bank. "It is very aging, care is. I sometimes think of you. Am I indeed everything you would wish me to be? I am not boring? You do not ever think of younger men?"

"In my profession?" she asked. "Certainly not! I am a mistress. I am much more concerned with seniority than youth."

A giant peacock spread the fan of its tail on the bank where they landed. It raised its head high over the scarlet blossoms of an aromatic magnolia bush and sang. The song was a soft, complicated refrain peculiar to peacocks. The P.A. sighed in Limsola's ardent, dutiful embrace.

"They are noisy," he said. "They are very noisy birds. Peacocks are . . . peacocks are very noisy birds," he added drowsily. A moment later, he was quite dead.

V

KANTOR, advertisement manager of the Gromwold *Times and Echo* had every exit from the laboratories covered by his men. Now that Shale had escaped, for the moment at any rate, from Metita and the Salumi women, it was open war. And since it was open war, it mattered little whether Shale was killed in an industrial fracas or spirited away by Metita. Once Kantor was master of Shale's spacecraft, his codes, records and his Groil, he was de facto Advertisement Manager of the Publishing House. Shale operated only from his ship and trusted no communication links to his subordinates. The ship was virtually Shale. Once he had taken it over, he would sack the Publisher's staff on Gromwold, appoint his own and then travel from planet to planet exercising his authority as Shale had done. Who wears the crown is king. There were Shale's bodyguards on the ship to contend with, but they would transfer their allegiance to himself as soon as they were convinced that Shale was out of the running. There would be no one among them of possible advertisement manager material or Shale would have jettisoned such a threat to his own authority long ago. There was also Phrix, Shale's Groil. Groils were never aggressive but they were always two thoughts ahead of you and needed watching. Only the Ruling Races in archexecutive positions had Groils. Kantor had no experience in how to deal with them, but it was comforting to consider that Groils were valuable precisely because they took orders without question from their intellectual inferiors. In fact the whole social structure of the universe was built on the well-tried principle of intellectual subservience to strength. Phrix was at this moment orbiting Shorne and appeared in no hurry to land. He seemed somehow to know that the airport was in hostile hands.

Kantor called him up on Shale's frequency from the research director's office. His voice, he thought, had a fair resemblance to Shale's and there was a certain amount of distortion, due to the ionospheres. In Shale's brusque man-

ner, he ordered Phrix in to land. Phrix was not deceived. Kantor tried another approach.

"I am now virtually Ad Manager of the Publishing House," Kantor told the research director. "I can reasonably call for your cooperation. Shale is no more than a person who once knew your daughter and is now a poor fugitive in your laboratories."

"You have it," Metita's father assured him. "Anyone running loose without escort in the laboratories could do untold mischief. Shale will be apprehended as soon as possible. Every attendant is armed and on the lookout for him."

"I will promise you adequate free-space in the *Lemos Galactic Monitor*," Kantor said, by way of thanking him. "I will confirm it with the editor as soon as my position is established."

"You expect no trouble from the editors?" the research director asked.

"Certainly not! Editors are always, in any company, firmly under the control of the advertisement manager. You will have noticed that in all the Publisher's papers, only advertisers are mentioned in a favorable light and non-advertisers are virtually put out of business as soon as possible."

"The Shorne laboratory excepted!"

"Of course. But only because you were Metita's father. Shale would never have allowed your laboratories to function unadvertised for any other reason."

The research director patted the marble bust of a former laboratory specimen who had once achieved the record weight of seven hundred standard Galactic pounds after thyroid injections. He switched on an external view-panel. Phrix was still in orbit. His, or rather, Shale's craft was nosing through the drifting hazy, green-veined, misty, cherry-pink layers of the upper ionosphere. To an Earth-antiquary, it could have called to mind a Norse long-ship riding calmly through a very peaceful summer Aurora Borealis. But the research director was not an Earth-antiquary.

"Why not call him down?" he asked. "Tell him Shale is dead and assert your authority. Groils always respond to authority. Without contact with Shale, he will be in need of a master. We can decide later what to do with him. I could use a Groil for a new experiment I have in mind."

"It's worth a try," Kantor said, agreeing. He called up Phrix again. "I am Advertising Manager," he transmitted. "I have eliminated Shale and informed the Publisher of my appointment. You will land at once and hand the ship and its records over to me."

"On the contrary," Phrix replied, nosing downward into

the second ionosphere. "I have received notice that I am appointed. From the Publisher. Have signaled *Times and Echo* offices takeover by Publishing House. Offered staff two and one-half percent increase. Their loyalty thus assured."

"That's a development I didn't expect," Metita's father murmured. "It's practically unknown to appoint Groils to such posts."

"It's a lie of course!"

"Impossible! Groils never lie. They have no mechanism for it!"

"We'll see about that!" Kantor returned to the Phrix frequency. His voice on the oscilloscope developed an ugly outline, very like the obituary cards announcing the passing of a distant dear one and, giving visual edge to the saw-teeth of sorrow, recording for posterity the wave pattern of his death rattle. "You are a Groil," he transmitted. "No Groils are ever appointed to managerial posts. Staff wouldn't stand for it. Two and a half percent increase impossible. All increases must be geared to increased production. Ancient law of Earth. Pity about Earth. Land and surrender!"

"Additional revenue from *Times and Echo* exactly covers increase. All higher executives dismissed. Yourself included. The purpose of adversity is the development of character occasioned by its acceptance. Recommend bowing of head and repetition of magic formula, 'mea culpa.'"

"I'll shoot down your craft first! We've got guns down here at Lulonga, matey. One more peep out of you and you'll get a ton of what's fissionable straight up your jacksie!"

"Then no one Advertisement Manager. All records and codes in craft. Have Gromwold police on board. You want war, Shorne and Gromwold?"

"Shoot him down!" Kantor shouted, but the director's hand had already closed over the switch.

"I only deal on a basis of equality with archexecutives," he said. "It appears you have lost out to a Groil."

"Take him!" Kantor raged and his bodyguard seized the director and held him against further orders. They showed little enthusiasm, however, thinking of the two and a half percent.

"It will be five percent when I'm in charge," Kantor promised them. "We will milk the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* to our own advantage."

His henchmen showed their appreciation by mildly pummeling their prisoner. No one likes battles for power among archexecutives. It makes life very difficult for menials, who, until they are sure which side is winning, are doubtful for whom to cheer.

"I need more men," Kantor told the director, taking a scalpel from a rack below a series of aquaria-like wall containers showing kidneys in pickle. "What have you suitable in the laboratory? Do you breed giants down there? Wolfmen? What's the nastiest thing you ever developed? I want it and the bigger it is, the better."

"We have some specimens nine feet tall," Metita's father confessed, eyeing the scalpel. "But they are slow and lethargic and have never been allowed outside their cages. Something smaller, with a built-in emotional control by electrical stimulus or periodic acid discharge, would probably be more efficacious."

"You're going to find me something," Kantor said, speaking as much with the scalpel as with his lips. "You're going to find me some reinforcements that are going to be real good, aren't you, daddy?"

"Yes," he promised, "you can have anything you like. Just take it, but please put that scalpel away. I can't stand the sight of blood."

"Right," Kantor announced. "We'll all go down to the lab and see what we can find. And if there's any funny business, I'll cut your ears off. Just to start with. We can also help look for Shale. My men at the airport must wait for Phrix to land. He'll come down in time and then we'll see what his lobes are made of. Right, let's get down to the elevator!"

The light on the monitoring panel glowed and they paused at the door to listen. Phrix was now over the laboratory and there was no time-lag in the conversation.

"Phrix to Shale. Report if alive or dead."

"Shale to Phrix. I am alive. Land and cover exits to laboratory. I am coming out."

"Phrix to Shale. On authority of Publisher I am Ad Manager. Taking over *Times and Echo* and your administration. You dismissed. Opposition still in control on Shorne. Advise remain in laboratory until situation clarifies."

"You damned, treacherous, double-crossing, two-horned subhuman monstrosity! You will obey my orders! No Groil questions the authority of the Ruling Races! Land at once!"

"Obey orders of Publisher. Cannot land. *Times and Echo* in control of airport."

"Why do you think my ship has guns! Shoot up all opposition and land at airport!"

"Obey orders Publisher. Self opposed all forms violence. Intellect triumphs over weapons! New universe in the making. Lion shall lie down with the lamb and tapir smile upon the ant. I speak metaphorically."

"What the whole spectrum of viruses are you talking about? Who asked your opinion on violence or ants or tapirs? The universe is made already and it's no part of your job to alter it. Get shooting!"

"I have ship. I am Ad Manager. You no one. You are trapped. I speak from position of strength. You waste good words."

"Listen, Phrix! I'm sure you mean well, but Groils are unsuited to command; you know they are. You know everything—you must know your own unsuitability. And what's all this about violence? It just shows how far your intellectual horned heads would get if we left decisions to you. How can you survive without violence? Violence is always defensive. Even if we attack, it is to prevent others attacking us. That has always been the justification of arms. If you are unarmed, the weak as well as the strong will attack you. If you believe your authority better than mine, and I and others oppose you, what can you do but shoot us down? Without violence you have no power, no possibility of sustaining a creed of nonviolence. You'll lose out even to the *Times and Echo*. They'll shoot fast enough, believe you me. So get those guns firing, there's a good chap, and we can talk terms when you've got me out of here."

"No shooting. No terms. Outmaneuver by intellect. New universe for posterity to inherit."

"Good for you, Phrix!"

A woman's voice. Somewhere in the dim labyrinth below Lulonga, Shale had a woman with him. A woman with a quiet, cultured voice and apparently left-wing views. A female Groil probably, but there were so few female Groils. The male Groils never seemed to need them.

"Who was that?" Kantor asked when no further sound came from the monitor but the crackle of sun-spot bombardment in the third ionosphere. The research director spread his hands.

"I thought he came alone."

"Metita?"

But Metita was leaning against the sliding doors that led to her chambers. Stroking a white tiger and smiling archly.

"Outmaneuvered by intellect?" She mused, inhaling blue narcotic smoke from a two foot long synthetic hash-mash holder. "Tell me more about this man Phrix. Is he susceptible? Three brains must triple the desire." Kantor shook his head gloomily.

"They inhibit all emotions," he said. "You would be no more to Phrix than a camel. You are committed to me."

"Or to Shale," she murmured. "You haven't caught Shale yet, have you?"

"We'll get him soon enough," he promised her. "And Phrix. It seems he's got some peculiar views. People have tried this lark of philosophy against guns before. The guns always win in the end. Chaps like Phrix are all the same; they think that what they are doing is right, whatever that means. And so they suppose that the other side thinks that what it is doing, in its own way, is right too. It doesn't. It just sits back and waits the chance to get the first shot in. And when the chance comes—that's the end of the philosopher."

"Phrix isn't important," she said. "Shale is. Bring me Shale's head or some other vital part of him and I am yours—body and that other thing—soul, isn't it? I shall stay all yours every moment of the day until someone else takes your place."

VI

IN THE SPACECRAFT above Lulonga, the Gromwold police inspector drew heavily on a large cigar, the product, duty-free, of Gromwold (Narcotics) Inc. He looked thoughtfully at Phrix, who was reclining, relaxed and unconcerned, watching the Shorne landscape traveling beneath him on the telescopic screen. The green, pastoral peace of it all stirred a distant race-memory at the very root of a lobe; a response that, in a being that could feel no yearnings and no nostalgia, was just the same, both feelings together. It was a fully-fledged yearning nostalgia and it triggered a cellular sigh-relay, although the muscular reflex of the sigh itself had atrophied at a time well before the Earth flood. Pity about Earth. Phrix, who could not sigh, felt the mental equivalent in the form of a minute electro-chemical discharge at a point any competent brain-cartographer would have labeled "Bridge of Sighs." The policeman, like policemen anywhere else, was not given to nostalgia and the knowledge that Phrix neither smoked nor used narcotics in any other form, nor had any need of alcohol, endeared him not at all, conjuring up as it did, an image of a man sufficient to himself, better than other men and thus, in a constabulary sense, needing the maximum amount of watching.

"What now?" he asked.

"We wait," Phrix told him. "All under control—no gains by hurrying."

"I don't get it," the police inspector grumbled. "You've got the spacecraft and all the records. Your own lot have

appointed you official Ad Manager. No one's been appointed officially for years. You've got everything on your side, including the best police contingent that ever came out of Gromwold. How come you let that lot down there make a monkey out of you?"

"No monkey." Phrix shook his head, the three crowns rocking from side to side. "Kantor soon finds *Times and Echo* surrendered to Publisher. Own men then desert him. Capitulate."

"Capitulate, my aunt Fanny! He'll capitulate all right until you turn your back and then he'll put a pellet through you. There's only one way to be sure who has won—when you've got the other side laid out in front of you and you've counted heads to make sure there isn't one missing. If there is, he'll get you. Shoot 'em up, boy! You've got right on your side. Everyone who's winning's got that."

"No more violence. Wasteful. Not necessary. New universe. Peace."

"And Shale? What about Shale when he gets out? I wouldn't be in your shoes, matey, if Shale catches up with you. Shale's got an all-universe reputation. You know what they say? They say that when Shale was born they took him along in his cage and showed him his ma and his ma, she said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'Praise the electron—it's yours and it's a bairn!' And she said, 'Is it now?' and she poked it doubtful-like with her finger and Shale, he bit and he sunk his teeth in, and he wouldn't let go till they prized his mouth open with a toothbrush. That's Shale, matey. What're you going to do? Shake him by the hand or something?"

"Maybe they kill Shale. I do not kill. Shale no one without the spacecraft. Spacecraft is manager, not Shale. Leave on Shorne—Metita."

"I don't get the object of the exercise. You're now the boss in your own outfit. That's fine. What are you going to do with the new power you got? What's all this about a new universe? What's wrong with the universe as it is? It's the only one we've got!"

"You think universe a good place?"

"B91!" The police inspector considered. "What's good? Good's what sticks to rules and bad's what doesn't. I didn't make the rules, no more than you. Who's beefing?"

"I make new rules."

"You don't make rules. Rules just are. How're you going to make new rules?"

"Change policy all papers. Publisher control all forms communication. T.V. Sensivision. Papers. Magazines. Tapes. Post-

ers. Wrappers. All forms packaging. No social message. No guidance. Only sell advertising space. Change all that. Lead people through papers to want new and better things. Honesty. No corruption. Proper use leisure. Teach men to think."

"You'll lose all your advertising!"

"No. Fallacy. Nowhere else to advertise. Publisher control all. Everyone advertise already. Built into system. Can't avoid system. Will still advertise. Totally unnecessary but will do so from faith and habit. But better standard demand. Independent news comment apart from ads—separate."

"I see why they never give the Groils the top jobs! There's something mighty funny going on inside that big head of yours. You're all mixed up. You can't have news apart from advertisements. They're part and parcel of the same thing. You can only have news in newsads and, anyway, no one reads them. They pick up their papers and open them out across the table and they glance through them out of custom and what's customary is right. It's not customary to read them. What's this you're trying to do? Think for other people? Give them standards you've thought up for them and teach them how to like 'em? People, thank Asgard, are conservative. They like things the way they've always known them. That's custom too and don't tell me that what's custom isn't always right or I'll go straight back to Gromwold. I'm a policeman and I hope I know right from wrong. What are you getting out of all this, anyway?"

"Nothing. Instrument in the scheme of things. Destiny of organism to achieve perfection. Self—the tool, of destiny."

"The biggest criminals in the universe," the police inspector, who knew his history, argued, "all blamed it on destiny. When things go your way, it's destiny. When they go someone else's, it's fate. Fate's bad and destiny's good. If you don't mind my saying so, and as a Groil, you don't mind anything, you're doing some pretty cockeyed thinking. Okay! So the organism tries to perfect itself. Right enough! *Itself*, matey—not someone else. The whole social system is based on man serving his own interest. He needs money and status and a knockabout jet-car. So he works and does as he's told and keeps out of trouble, just so no one comes along and knocks his status down a peg or two, or takes his girlfriend or sends him to a penal planet. Your Publisher owns papers to make money. Think he cares what goes in them, as long as it pays? Think he ever reads them? What publisher ever read his own papers? What's he pay editors for? All the Publisher does is count the ads and see he's got one more than last year. That's what pays, matey, ads—not news. So the Publisher lives on Asgard and pays for

all the people who make all the commodities that pour into Asgard. Your job is to make money for the Publisher so he can spend it and pay you and all your staff and all the people who make all the things he wants. Where would they all be if he didn't want anything for himself? Starving. You start getting people to think and want something more than money and you'll upset the whole delicate balance of universal economy. You keep the ads running and keep 'em spending, matey! That way you'll perfect yourself and let the rest of us find our own perfection and that'll be a bit more on our credit cards than we had last year, that's all."

If Phrix had had the bio-chemical ability to look or feel ill at ease, he would have done so. The central, humanoid area of his brain functioned much as the, admittedly smaller, crinkled cranium of the police inspector. But evolution had built on to his frontal lobes until they had extended their physical and psychical areas into two quite separate intellectual reflex relays, with their own memory adjuncts. The central brain memories were the physical and inherited race memories, the consciousness of identity, antecedents and the garnered happenings of an individual lifetime. The one intellectual memory, in the right-hand lobe, was a reservoir of filtered and refined aesthetic experience. The second, in the left-hand lobe, was not a memory at all in the usual sense. It was a reflective correction of filtered physical experience, transposed into a secondary awareness of what could or should have been. The abbreviated phraseology of the Groils was due to their inability to translate a synthesis of the three-brain, tri-phrenic thinking into a language that was inadequate even for normal uniphrenic expression.

As he looked out over the mauve-tinted clouds of Shorne, Phrix was conscious, not only of his inability to express what he meant, but even, at the point where the three memory-chains coalesced, to know in any unified way what exactly it was he did mean.

The memory of what could or should have been, in the mind of Phrix, hankered after the things that had or might have been. Evolution does not concern itself with the past. Evolution molds what is into what will be. Phrix, formulating a course of action at the meeting point of the three memory-trains, found only the humanoid area competent to throw a tentative thought-probe into the future and say, "This will be." And the humanoid area, being humanoid, saw the universe with Phrix at its hub. Humanoid areas are prone to personalize.

"Long time ago," Phrix said, thoughtfully, almost in a

mood of sadness he could only partly feel. "Long time ago. On Far-Groil."

"Where?" the inspector asked.

"New America."

"Oh! Sure! Yes—around Barnard's Star."

"It was Far-Groil then. Very long time ago. They came from Earth."

"Pity about Earth!"

"Great pity! It was happy on Far-Groil."

"Thought you Groils couldn't feel emotion?"

"One emotion only. When only one and no conflict, it is not true emotion as you know it. Emotions arise from conflict. One thing only we feel in Far-Groil. All time once—happiness. Anarchy. Large planet—few Groils. Time to think, write, paint, play music, sing. Highly developed culture. Contemplative. Philosophers. All peace. They came from Earth. Machines. Government. Money. Very busy. Always doing things."

"Pity about Earth!"

"We had telescopes. Radio. Knew astronomy. Knew about Earth—near neighbor. Welcomed first spaceships. Offered them home on Far-Groil. Big mistake. Very busy men. No lobes. Small brains, busy hands. Busy bodies. Multiply fast. Soon more Earthmen than Groils. Better organized. Government. Earthmen govern, Groils governed. Earthmen term it, penalty for being anarchists. Highly developed intellect no use to organize, government. Did not understand, do not understand now. Soon Groils do all work, Earthmen play. Penalty for having lobes, Earthmen say."

"Pity about—"

"You do not know what you say. No intellect. Why—pity?"

"Don't know." The police inspector scratched his head. "Now you mention it—it's a good question—why? Frizzled if I know. It's like spitting through the punchhole in your credit card. Right thing to do—right thing to say. Custom's always right. Reckon it was a pity, too. They all went to—where was it? Far-Groil? New America?"

"What was a pity?"

"How the three penal planets do I know? War, I suppose. What else? It's always war that's been a pity when it's over. When you say, 'Pity that planet died,' what you mean is—'Pity we killed it.'"

"No. Not war. Climate. War indirectly. You know nuclear bombs?"

"Those old things they had way back? The things you see as monuments in some parts? Great cumbersome bag of tricks with a bang inside?"

"Yes. That time long ago, Earth in two camps. East and West. Both made bombs. Each side equal number. Couldn't use. All East bombs automatically fired when West bombs came and vice versa. Very stalemate. Went on for years. Each side making equal number of what other side made. Poisons. Psycho-chemicals. Bacteria. Death rays. And then nature took a hand. Ice age came. Ice cap spread down and up from poles over East and West. Those that could went to Far Groil. Named it New America. Other side went to a planet around Centauri Alpha. New Russia. Both sides left on Earth at last cooperate. Destiny will not be cheated of full quota doom. Cooperation achieves what centuries of hate could not. Both sides pool bombs and put them in the ice caps. Idea is melt ice and break ice age. Big bang. Earth split in half—weakness in crust at poles. Hot magna spill—all steam. Break up and boil."

"Pity about Earth!"

"New America very powerful. Sensation-loving Earthmen breed fast. Groils lose interest, breed little. Still more Earthmen, still fewer Groils. New Russia not successful. East Earthmen succumb to virus, B91. No antidote. West Earthmen discover antidote, isolate virus. Watch while East Earthmen die. All in cause of peace. When enemy dead, no war. Use virus deplete populations of planets before conquest. Arrive not as conquerors but as doctors. Welcomed. Now everywhere, only Ruling Races. Few Groils kept for knowledge and few Salumis kept for beauty left. Ruling Classes of Ruling Races rule by threat of virus. Groils watch Earthmen spread over universe. Do not contest. Contemplate. Wait for evolution. Evolution now ready. Through myself. Tool of destiny."

"I get your point as a Groil," the inspector agreed. "You want to get your own back now that you've got the upper hand, or you think you have. What I don't see, is why you don't shoot up the airport. If I were a Groil, it'd give me a lot of pleasure to feel my finger on the trigger."

"Cannot feel resentment. No desire revenge. Only tool of evolution. We land now. Signal arrive Gromwold, *Times and Echo* surrender, accept my terms."

"You know best," the inspector conceded. "I hope for your sake and mine that Kantor and his men on Shorne know they've lost out to evolution."

The pilot brought the ship around and hovered over Lunga airport, preparing to land. That is to say, the pilot was present while the ship carried out the necessary maneuvers. A good ship—and Shale's was a good ship—was capable of

assessing the right course of action in any contingency according to its owner's wishes.

The airport appeared to be deserted. The setting sun tipped the control tower with rays of scarlet, green and gold. In the marshaling yards and on the landing strip, the lights went out.

"I don't like it," the inspector grumbled, directing his men to cover the buildings from the open portholes. "At least fire a warning burst from the cobalt cannon."

Phrix shook his head and signaled the pilot to land. The joy-stick steered his hand into the right position and unobtrusively throttled back, extending a microphone to Phrix at the same time. He called up Kantor on the general broadcast frequency.

"Come to airport," he said. "No harm intended you. Terms we will talk."

There was a burst of small arms' fire as the undercarriage buffers settled on the strip and the airport cannon, normally covering the approach lanes, swiveled and trained its barrels on the ship.

"Fire before they do!" the inspector shouted.

"All ad records in ship. They dare not fire."

A squad of heavily armed *Times and Echo* men emerged from the main administrative building and advanced under cover of bulletproof shields. The inspector fired a gas bomb and they paused to fix their masks. He picked off the leader with an energy capsule that exploded on impact, disintegrating his head.

"Tactical napalm!" he ordered.

"No napalm!" Phrix countered. "Barbarous. Unworthy of Groil!"

"Good grief!" the inspector shouted. "This is war, not ring-around-the-roses! What's it matter if we boil or fry them, so long as they all fall down?"

"No napalm!" Phrix repeated. "Inform Shorne government the airport is in unauthorized hands."

"The government'll listen to you when they know you've won, matey," the inspector told him contemptuously. "You've got to win first. Where'd you learn your politics? In that long-ago, faraway Groil?"

"Okay, you lot!" he shouted to his constables. "Their feet show under their shields now and then. Fry their feet!"

The constables opened fire with energy capsules and the enemy retreated behind their shields to the main building, leaving half a dozen of their number writhing, footless, on the landing strip.

"Humanity triumphs!" The inspector grunted. "What now, philosopher?"

"Wait!" Phrix told him.

"You're kidding yourself that's Groil tactics," the policeman said, grinning. "Not on your sweet frontal lobes, it isn't. It's sheer indecision. You don't know what to do, do you?"

"Wait!" Phrix repeated, calmly.

It was partly indecision, the old Groil weakness, partly the habit of menial thinking. He would use Ruling Race methods at the order of the Ruling Races, but would not initiate their use himself. But it was partly also from a more tactical reason. There had been no sign of Kantor himself. Without Kantor, there was a fair chance that his men would surrender to the certainty of an immediate two and a half percent rather than wait for a problematical five. An ad in the book is worth two in the pipe line. There was also Shale.

VII

SHALE HIMSELF was now almost in sight of the western gates of the laboratory. He was, in fact, outside cage Number 99,871, when the searchers first caught sight of him. Through miles of corridor, he had eluded them, through the free-range areas of the mini-worlds, where a half dozen inhabitants roamed, believing their dark corners to be all there was of the universe and fighting each other for control of every dung-hill. Through the simulated sheep farms, where men and women were conditioned to bleat at the sight of a cocked hat, a flag, or a slogan. "My country—right or wrong!" *Baa!* "Britannia rules the electro-magnetic waves!" —*Baa!* "We must be ready, all of us, to give our life's blood for our Fatherland, and for our Motherland, we lay down our lives for thee." Salute, raise the hand, clench the fist, point the only true way into the misty distances and they set up such a bleating and baa-baa-ing, that Shale and his consort had run like mad lest the welkin-ringing betrayed their whereabouts. It was all designed to prove something or other.

Now, outside cage Number 99,871, creeping from a side alley with Marilyn at his heels, he found himself face-to-face with an armed squad of attendants. An energy capsule whistled past his ear and a hand protruding through the bars of an adjacent cage disintegrated. Inside, a specimen whimpered. Shale ducked and ran back up the alleyway like a subject injected with the speed factor in a Karkoff

chromosome. Marilyn, after a lifetime of confinement in her cage, was slower moving.

"Come on!" he shouted, gaining on her.

He rounded the next corner as a second capsule whistled by. He was in the outer corridor, with cages on one side only, and it was dark. He ran on, for the moment safe from missiles if not from pursuit. Somewhere behind, he heard Marilyn cry as she fell and the shouts of the attendants as they surrounded her. He began to run faster.

"What's Marilyn to me?" he gasped.

What was Marilyn anyway? An ape. How long had he known her? A few hours, perhaps. Time seems to stand still underground. She wasn't worth a second thought. What would they do to her—as if he cared? Put her back in her cage, most likely. And no harm done. She was a valuable specimen; they wouldn't shoot her. Or had she served her purpose by just being bred? If they did shoot her, there would be one specimen less in the laboratory, wouldn't there? Plenty of chimpanzee serum for another injection and another Marilyn bred behind bars. What the B91! *Pity about her clothes*, he thought. She had wanted clothes very much, stupid animal. *I wonder if they'll let her have clothes in the end*, he mused. It might stop the students sniggering. Why should they snigger? A monkey's fanny is no different from anyone else's. Probably a monkey's most human possession.

He was lonely, running like a hunted rat with the ferrets after him in a warren of holes. Why the B91 should he run? How many of them were there in that little band? Six? Seven? One Ruling Class Ruling Race was worth any ten of—*baa!* But what right had they to take Marilyn away from him, an archexecutive? And perhaps disintegrate her wide, stupid, ape mouth with an energy capsule. They would beat her probably. All the keepers carried whips. *If there's going to be any shooting*, he said to himself, *I'm doing it!* He stopped and spat angrily at a face that appeared grinning fatuously at him behind an adjacent grille. **TRUMPHE OF MODERN SURGERY! HUMAN HEAD CRAFT OF HOMO SAPIENS ON FEMALE KANGAROO.** He edged his way silently back to the last intersection and, concealing himself around the corner, waited. In the silence he could hear the men-sheep bleating.

The echo was back again. All around him there was the clang of large boots on metal and it was impossible to tell from which direction they would come. If from the right, from the way he had come, well and good. He could spring upon them before they knew he was there. But what if they

appeared behind him, or heading him off, from the left? He had not long to wait. Two attendants clattered past the intersection running in step, each with his pistol at the ready and peering ahead of them in the gloom. Shale grimaced as he stepped out behind them and with a sudden spring landed between them, at the same time slamming their heads together with such force that blood poured from their ears and they sank in a heap at his feet. He picked up the pistols—personal protection jobs firing conventional lead bullets. Six of them each. Enough for twelve attendants, if they didn't get him first.

He bent low and made his way back along the corridor. Peering cautiously from the corner where he had first eluded pursuit, he saw why the hunt, for the moment, was off. Two attendants were holding Marilyn against the bars of a cage while two more beat her with rifle butts. He took careful aim and fired twice. The two who were holding her fell, clutching their stomachs, and Marilyn was free and running in his direction. He fired again and a third fell.

"One movement from the rest of you," he shouted, "and you're all dead!" He couldn't tell how many there were but there seemed to be at least a dozen. They stood with their hands in the air and Marilyn rounded the corner, choking hoarsely for breath.

"You're out of condition," he grumbled. "Get weaving toward the main gates. We're going to run around those jokers. I've got nine bullets left and there're at least ten of them."

Marilyn could manage only a quick, shambling ungainly walk, but the attendants were in no mood to follow in the darkness. They headed in the general direction of the western gates, parallel with the main corridor.

"There will be guards at the gates," she gasped.

"We'll think about that when we get there," he said. "As long as it's dark, they don't know what weapons I've got. They'll keep their distance."

He stopped and looked at the welts and bruises on her legs and buttocks. Something, he didn't know quite what, moved him to fury. He turned and ran back to the corner. There were guards bending over their wounded comrades, apparently considering whether they were worth treating or if the more humane course was not to shoot them, then and there. Oblivious to the need to conserve his ammunition, he emptied one pistol into the group and would have followed up with the other but they were all pitched forward into a heap and appeared to be dead enough to mollify him. He returned to Marilyn.

"Bastards," he said. "All keepers are bastards." Marylin was pleased that he cared enough for her to lose his temper, but was just the same aghast at his homicidal methods of showing it.

"Have you known many keepers?" she asked.

"Not a one," he answered. "But they wear uniforms. Everyone in uniform is a bastard."

"I didn't know," she confessed, humbly.

Suddenly the lights came on and from somewhere ahead there was shouting and the ominous baying of hounds.

"Police dogs!" he said, grinning.

"I thought police dogs sounded like that. My teachers never made the sounds, but they described them very well."

"How stinking pedantic of them. I'm a martyr for pedants. The dogs'll tear us to pieces—you know that, don't you? All police dogs are trained to kill."

"I know. They told me that too."

"Come on!" he shouted. "Let's get out of this!"

"If you cross water," she explained, "they can't pick up the scent, they—"

"Belt up!" he stormed. "Where's the viral infested water?"

All the cages in the outside corridor were empty and he stopped outside the open gates of one, a large enclosure, containing a high platform with steps leading up to a small hut about three yards from the ground. Ropes with nooses hung from a gibbet framing the public side of the structure. As they climbed the steps, Shale noticed the show-card on the exterior hut wall.

"Hanging experiment. Subject is conditioned to set noose about his neck before meals in the enclosure. He is then blinded with hot pins and transferred to the platform. As food is proffered, he will search for the noose and hang himself."

"It's ghastly!" Marylin gasped. She was apt to personalize and lacked true scientific sense. Shale assumed she was referring to their situation. It was ghastly enough. The vast underground labyrinth was echoing with the baying of the police dogs and the whole hullabaloo had disturbed and frightened a number of the specimens who were adding to the din by shrieking and screaming in the elemental expression of pre-verbal terror. Shale and Marylin concealed themselves inside the hut and waited.

"Fortunately they haven't got our scent," he said. "Unless they found something of mine to show them."

"They identified me," she confessed. "They have only to take them to my cell and they will be here in minutes."

"Get out!" he shouted. "Take your damned scent some—"

where else! You stink, do you hear! You stink to the high outer orbit of Asgard! What are you doing, following me around?"

The hair on her back was torn and the skin lacerated by the rifle butts and a trickle of blood had clotted, matting the down on her buttocks. She cringed from him, drooping, bending forward like an ape as she limped to the door. Her straight back, high chin, and gently, reflective demeanor had crumbled before his scorn and rancor, exposing her for what she indeed was: a human-ape shell with all-ape underneath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize at first that they would use my scent. I should have thought. I'm sorry if I've made you angry. Of course, I'll go at once."

She was halfway down the ladder before he called her back. He was angry at his own stupidity, since to keep her with him served no useful purpose at all. It would mean only that now they would both die, instead of only one of them. The business of everyone living is to stay alive, that is all life is about; but, irrationally, he had wanted her to stay. People, even in these advanced ages, occasionally feel the same incongruous attachment to pet cats.

"What's the odds!" he said, huffily. "You die—I die. What difference does it make? What's in life for anyone, if it comes to that? Who cares?"

"The universe is worse than I thought," she agreed, as she snuggled against him. "Studied subjectively inside my cage, it didn't seem so bad, or perhaps the teachers were programmed to gloss over the hardness of it. I suppose it's always hard to come out of your own cage and expose yourself to the wind and the rain. This laboratory—it's wrong."

"Wrong?" he asked, peering through the window with his pistol ready. "How do you mean—wrong?"

"People shouldn't be used for experiments like this," she said. The baying of the hounds was nearer and had taken on a new and more urgent note. They had picked up the scent.

"We need the data." He shrugged. "Even if we've got it all already, you have to train students to find out for themselves. These things aren't people, they're specimens. A man's a man if that's what you tell him he is. It's all a matter of environment. You're whatever you're brought up to be; you're nothing in yourself. These are specimens. What would you want us to do? Use animals?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed. "That would be even worse. In a sense, now we do it to ourselves. To experiment and do

these ghastly things to animals, who would never even benefit from the data, would be unthinkable."

"Listen!" he said. "Will you shut up? The hounds'll be here in a minute. If there's no more than three, I can shoot them. If there's one more, he'll tear us to pieces, so you might as well know that and stop blathering."

"It's important to get things straight before you die!"

"Why?" he asked, answering in spite of himself. "What difference does it make? Once you're dead, who cares whether you're straight or not?"

"I want you to agree with me," she whispered. "It's important that you should. Then I'll know the universe wasn't all bad. I'd like to know it wasn't all bad before the dogs come."

He turned away from the window, from the whole business of life and death, and looked at her with a kind of wry perplexity. What did she look like? A cringing, despondent ape, sitting on her haunches and watching him with deep-set, pathetic eyes, more concerned with his opinions than the howling of the police dogs.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, almost kindly. "What's it to you if the universe is good or bad, whatever that means? We're all bad or we're all good, just as you like to think it. We're all the same anyway, the difference is only in what we all think of each other. Kantor's out to kill me. I'm out to kill him if I get the chance. So I'm bad to Kantor and Kantor's bad to me—not that I care what anything is to Kantor; it's what they are to me that counts. There's a lot of people—specimens—here in cages. I expect that's bad for them, although I've met at least one who was happier where he was than outside. It may be bad for them, but it's not bad for me, so why should I care?"

"One of them might be you!"

"What are you babbling about now? How could one of them be me?"

"But for an accident of birth, you might have been a specimen in a cage."

"Now you're really talking like a maniac. I'm me. How the B91 virus could I be anyone else? If a creature is born in a cage—that's him—a different person. If I were a different person, I couldn't be me. Now shut that great mouth of yours and quit squawking."

"It is a person who can feel like you."

He was really angry now. Too angry even to listen and look for the dogs. He turned on her and prodded her with his pistol. "There's something wrong with you!" he shouted. "You must have an I.Q. of about ten to talk like that. Are

you lecturing me about what I should feel like and think like and look like? What do you know about what I think like? What do you know about how anyone thinks like? You're only a stinking, hairy ape, that's all you are."

He returned to the window, awkwardly, turning his back on her and conscious of her silence. There were no medals for shouting at idiots who didn't shout back and wouldn't know what to shout about if they did. He trained his pistol in the direction the dogs would come and covered an odd feeling of guilt by staring into the distance, preoccupied with the business of survival. Slowly, he relented and turned to face her. She was ~~very~~ quiet. He watched a big tear running down the side of her fat, squat nose. Another followed it. She was sobbing quietly to herself.

At least, he thought, she's that much human. Only humans can cry—and orangutans. Not chimps. I think orangutans only cry when they're frightened. Perhaps only humans can feel the things that make them cry for anything but fear.

"I'm sorry," he said aloud—he had never apologized to anyone before and the words had an unreal, detached quality as if they just happened to be there rather than being in any way related to thoughts of his. "I shouldn't have said that, I suppose."

"It's true?" she asked. "I am an ape?"

Why the Salumi pox did she have to cry like that? He felt like a heel. He felt like a man who had just killed ten thousand fellow creatures at the press of a trigger feels when he kicks his dog. Thank all the mysteries of deep space they would soon both be dead. Nothing that had been mattered, once you were dead and not responsible for it any more.

"You're not really an ape," he said. He put his arm around her and patted the hair on her left breast.

"I am," she whispered. "I'm just an ape. I have known it all along really, although the machines never told me anything about myself. Everything in the universe, they described in detail, only me and anything about me they avoided. It was almost as if I embarrassed them. I knew apes had hair and humans didn't. I tried not to think about it, but I knew it really. Everytime I felt my face and my mouth and my nose, I used to get a little frightened twinge in my stomach. I can't tell you anything now; I can't have any opinions that aren't the same as yours. I thought I was right to feel sorry for the specimens; I thought you were wrong not to care. I thought Phrix was right and you were wrong. But you are human. You must be right. There are a million years of evolution on your side. I'm sorry."

"But you're not an ape," he said. "Not really. You're a hybrid. You can think like a human even if you are a bit mixed up. All this caring business. Humans don't care. They go through the motions of sympathy sometimes when it's fashionable to be involved and left-wing and self-abased. It doesn't mean a thing. It's just an act so that you believe you are really something positive, even if you're not, and your friends will say what a nice guy you are. But none of us really feels anything. You were carrying it all much too far. You were *really* feeling. It was a pity they didn't let you see your show-card. I think they should have. You're quite famous and you're the first success they've had in that line. Anyway—forget about the ape part. Apes don't cry and you're crying."

"Except orangutans," she said, sniffing.

"You know too much," said Shale with a grunt.

"Do you care for me?" she asked. "Do you care if I live or die? The machines said people could care and apes just lived for the day. They seemed to think much better about people than you do—perhaps, in a way, they were jealous. I can care and I've always wanted someone to care for me."

"You're speaking like a woman now." He grinned. "Although I expect apes are just the same—the female ones. All right—yes, I care."

Dogs were spilling from all sides, down the corridor, out of the side alleys, yelping and howling, racing for the enclosure. There were at least thirty of them, pawing at the steps and leaping up a few rungs at a time and falling back, foaming and snarling with thwarted rage. The enclosure was full of them, milling and howling and jostling each other to reach the ladder and their quarry. Police dogs must pay for their keep by making sure no escaping criminal embarrasses the community with the cost of his trial. Everyone is guilty until proved innocent. The police take good care to see that only the guilty die.

"I know how a fox feels," he muttered. They had hunted foxes like this once, he remembered, having nothing better to do.

Dog handlers began to appear in the wake of their dogs, carrying whips and trident-like goads. They arranged themselves in a semicircle, staring at the platform owlishly with their mouths open. Behind them came Kantor. From the far side of the roadway he hailed Shale above the noise of the hounds with a portable megaphone.

"Just for the book, Shale," he shouted. "If you shoot me, the others will see that the dogs get you."

Expecting a volley of capsules, Shale pulled Marilyn to

the floor where a faulty joint in the plastic sheets allowed them to watch developments below.

"You can surrender, of course," Kantor called, "and come to no harm. Otherwise we shall have to blow or burn you out."

"No harm!" Shale laughed softly. "Once down the steps and he'll set the dogs on us. Not that they'll need any setting."

Either Kantor did not know that Shale was armed, or he had misjudged the distance. There he was, standing on a little mound like a latter-day Eros, waving his megaphone, and well within range. Shale rested his pistol in the crook of his arm and took careful aim. Marilyn laid a horny hand on his. "It's not the way," she said. "We can't win. Why kill him when it will make no difference?"

"You're nuts," he said. "Monkey nuts. But don't worry. I'll save a bullet for each of us. I won't let them take you. But that third-rate ad rep is coming too."

But Kantor, seeing, or sensing the gunbarrel aimed at his head, dived suddenly behind the armored shield of one of the dog handlers and the bullet went wide.

"Right, Shale!" he shouted. "You've asked for it! You're going to get it! Burn him out!"

Shale recognized the napalm-firing firepiece in the hands of an attendant and surprisingly enough felt fear only for Marilyn. He fired once at the shield purely as a gesture of defiance, knowing it was impervious to his sort of ammunition. There was a loud report, the gun fired and the hut burst into flames around them.

"You can burn or take the dogs, Shale!" Kantor shouted through the loudspeaker above the noise of the hounds and the crackle of the flames. "Take your choice! I'll put an obituary notice in the *Lemos Monitor*."

Shale had his pistol against Marilyn's forehead when he saw the chute. It was like a mirage. Already his life had been saved once by a garbage chute and now suddenly appearing like a split in the pants of destiny, a hole. The flames, lighting up the dim interior of the hut, exposed it—as welcome a sight as an oasis in the burning sands. It was a disposal channel for the specimen's bodies after the hanging experiment. Inside the hole was a crude conveyor, a series of rollers, sloping from the rear of the hut and disappearing through the wall of the enclosure. In a moment, he had picked Marilyn up in his arms and tossed her on to the incline before diving headfirst after her into the darkness that led through the wall of fire.

VIII

OUTSIDE THE LABORATORY, in the spaceship at Lulonga airport, the police inspector pressed his pistol between the convulsions on Phrix's right and left temples. "Destiny or no destiny," he said, "I'm going to give evolution a hand. Get the cannon trained on that building and blow it to the outer periphery!"

"No!" said Phrix.

"I'm not talking to you, little Groil." The inspector grinned. "You can't feel fear, I know that. I did a course on Groils way back in my student days. I'm talking to my gunners. We're taking over the ship. You can have it back when I've sorted out this little lot for you. You don't seem to know what it's all about, but I do. I'll have this chap Kantor and his lucky lads filling the valleys of the penal planets with picks and shovels and mountains to hew at before you can say '*Lemos Galactic Monitor*.' All right, boys! Blow them out of there!"

"You are servants of a government and I am Archexecutive. You must obey or go yourself to a penal planet."

"Not a chance, sonny," the policeman said, chuckling. "You said yourself, Groils feel no resentment. No resentment is what you said. When it's all over and you've been saved a lot of trouble, you'll thank me for using my own initiative, since you don't seem to have any yourself. Unless gratitude is another thing Groils don't know about. I shouldn't be surprised, because the Ruling Races aren't so hot on that score either. Never mind, when you tell the Publisher, the Publisher'll say, 'Fine—you won, didn't you?' You start belly-aching when you've lost, matey—just now, you're winning."

"Fire!" he ordered.

The guns were silent and their operators stared back at the inspector with blank incomprehension. Slowly, they shook their heads. It was the first mutiny in any police force for generations.

"Underestimate Groil intellect," Phrix said, his sad eyes looking somewhere into the deep distances of time and space. "Much persuasive force in single word *no*. Inner compulsion in verbal projection. Will also work on you—shall I show you?"

With a quick blow, the inspector struck him down with the butt of his pistol. He tested Groil resilience with an exploratory kick in the stomach. Phrix lay still. A million years had developed his brain, but had done little to strengthen the casing of its skull.

"No you don't, matey," the inspector said. "I'm not having fish-eyed Groils making a monkey out of me. That short course on Groils in my rookie days taught me a lot. 'Hit 'em before they start thinking at you,' they said. No one thinks very well with a crack in their skull."

"Should not have done that," Phrix groaned. "Contrary to evolution. Retrogressive step. Path leads to jungle and Neanderthal."

"Yeah!" The policeman grinned. "I guess it does that, matey. You can live or die for all I care, but now you've called in Gromwold police, Gromwold police are going to give you and the public service. We don't lose out to anyone."

"Fire!" he ordered.

The cobalt cannon belched a puff of smoke and a low rumble. The administrative building, a vast cubiform structure in white Gromwold grade marble, vanished in a black bellowing mushroom cloud of smoke and steam.

"Evolution on the march," the inspector announced. "No one could have wiped out that little lot before evolution took over. Now out we go and wrinkle them out!"

"A guard for the prisoner?" a sergeant asked, looking at Phrix.

"This chap?" The inspector laughed. "Not on your Nelly's knickers, matey. He'll do no one any harm. We're on his side, aren't we? He'll just sit and think while we do the killing. When we've put his world right with our weapons, he'll say he never wanted those horrible things done and he's a pacifist at heart. We're all bloody pacifists if there's an army somewhere to protect us. Come on, let's go get 'em!"

"Shorne government!" Phrix called. "Without me, you break Shorne law!"

"Gromwold's bigger than Shorne," the inspector called back. "That's what law's all about. They'll keep well out of it. This is a private war."

With a clatter of big boots, the contingent disappeared through the hatchway, fanning out when they reached the ground and spraying the airport buildings indiscriminately with energy fire. Evolution anywhere, Phrix thought ruefully, is invariably preceded by the clatter of boots. It is sometimes difficult for even the most intellectually-minded to convince themselves that boots in the van are not in any way connected with the evolution they precede, that the clatter and the rat-a-tat-tat find no echo in the organism's core, where the soft whisper of evolution plays, unconcerned, with permutations of nucleic acid.

Phrix climbed painfully to his feet, feeling the indentation between the crowns of his head for possible fractures. The

humanoid brain was badly concussed, but the higher intellectual centers were functioning normally. The inspector's boot had left an area of agony in the region of his spleen and he thought with regret that although his ancestors on Far-Groil had outgrown and inhibited all emotions, they had never learned to ignore ordinary physical pain. But, then, there had been little pain on Far-Groil.

"We leave," he said to the pilot. "Nothing for us on Shorne. Shale fight Kantor and Kantor fight Shale and inspector fight both. Go back Lemos. Wait for evolution. Much work with editors."

"Nothing doing!" The pilot refused. "I work for the Advertisement Manager. I'm not at all sure you're winning. I'm staying right here on Shorne where the three of you are. Then I'm giving my loyalty to the one that's left when the others are safely dead. Let's not get in each other's hair, shall we, while we wait and see what happens, eh?"

"I appointed by Publisher," Phrix reminded him.

"Yes," the pilot agreed. "And the Publisher is safe on Asgard. I'm here on Shorne. And here I stay until I know who's boss." The ship apparently agreed with him, since the opinion of a pilot was no more than a rubber stamp on the course a ship had already taken. It was unheard of for a pilot to go against the wishes of his ship; by doing so, he would expose to the universe and more important, to himself, the superfluous nature of his office. And no one likes to be superfluous. Ship and pilot had thus ranged themselves together against their legal master and awaited without any very great interest his reaction.

Shale would of course have shot the pilot dead and engaged another, which no doubt would have been enough to have convinced the ship. Pilots were ten a cent. You used them, like everything else, out of custom. The ship was fully automatic and programmed to take you anywhere you would ever want to go, pilot or no pilot. Yes, Shale would have shot him and Kantor would have shot him, but then, the pilot would not have argued with Kantor or Shale and the ship would have responded faithfully to either. But not so Phrix. Phrix did not even apply the persuasive force of Groil intellect. His head ached and he was again at the three-way point of indecision. The Ruling Races acted. That was why they were the Ruling Races. The lower the I.Q., the more the compulsion to do and to be. The higher executives were all in the low I.Q. bracket. That was why they were higher executives.

It is one thing to know what should be done and another to open the eyes of those who should see it too. Clouding

his vision of an ordered universe of reformed Earthmen was a nostalgic, hovering image of Far-Groil, where no Earthmen had been. But one never went back. No one could relive even recent, personal memories. One could not recapture the glint of the sun, a smile, the touch of a hand, nor a tiny, trivial thing that had once been dear. How then Far-Groil? Evolution was like that, only more so. Perhaps the universe had retrogressed since Far-Groil, but it would find a new course, hover for centuries below the brink of another horizon, and then, in a day, an hour, a second perhaps, the new thought would come flooding over the arch of the universe's ultimate end and there would be a cosmic renaissance. New worlds—but not Far-Groil.

The pilot was looking him over with sardonic, sleepy eyes. "We'll forget about Lemos, shall we?" he said.

"You don't see," Phrix whispered. "You don't see—is all wrong and the Publisher can put it right."

"I see my inter-galactic credit card." The pilot yawned. "And a lot of use that would be without my pay in the bank. You've got to win out. I've got to win out. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

The beacon on the control tower flashed a message into the gathering darkness. It always flashed the same message at nightfall. "Land at Lulonga airport," it said. The Publisher rented the space to the city fathers. It was totally unnecessary. Shorne had only one airport—Lulonga.

IX

THE ROLLERS on the narrow conveyor linked up with other chutes from other parts of the laboratory, shuttling its cargoes on to a broad, wide belt traveling slowly through a dark tunnel. The dark tunnel ended in a brightly lit underground factory where the conveyor disappeared through the flaps of a large, stainless steel contrivance. What was inside the stainless steel contrivance was, for the moment, obscure. Marylin and Shale rolled over and slipped from the belt on to a stainless steel gangway that circled the factory or warehouse or whatever it was a few feet above the ground floor. An odd body or two arrived down the side chutes, joined the main stream and disappeared into the belly of the machine.

At the other end, about twenty yards away, packets were emerging, wrapped in brightly decorated wrappers. Each packet bore the message: EAT AT LULONGA CANTEEN.

The Publisher also controlled the advertising on meat wrappers. The Publisher's messages were built in to all

systems everywhere. As the packets trundled away they passed, before disappearing through a flap into the wall, between two magnetic poles which activated a device that bound them in bright green tape. The tape exhorted the recipient to read the Lemos *Galactic Monitor*.

"Praise the Publisher!" Shale grinned. "I'm hungry!" He made his way around the gangway to the delivery end of the machine, which was obviously a meat processing contrivance, and picked up a packet from the conveyor. Turning it over, he found on the reverse side a further announcement: SALT AND PEPPER BY GROMWOLD SPICES UNIVERSAL!

"You're not going to eat it?" Marilyn said, gasping.

"Why not?" he asked.

"It's human flesh!"

"So what?" he wanted to know. "It's processed."

"You can't!" she cried, snatching the packet from him. "Shale, you can't!"

"What's eating you?" he asked, mystified.

"You might be! For all you knew, that could have been I!"

"I get your point," he agreed, taking another packet that opened automatically from the warmth of his hand, displaying attractively colored meat slices with a legend imprinted through their centers as had once been the practice with sticks of rock: EAT NOW, PAY LATER.

"At the same time," he continued, "it doesn't look like you and it's cooked and titivated with spices and flavor enhancers. I doubt if it will even taste like you, so why should I care? I don't know what you taste like, anyway."

"Because," she begged, "because I ask it."

He put down the packet on the stainless steel rail and looked at her thoughtfully. A broad-mouthed, wet-eyed ape. Wanting him to do something for no better reason than she wanted him to. But the eyes were pleading and, in spite of their setting, they were not the eyes of an ape. Looking at Marilyn was like coming across a gorilla threading a needle and discussing some knotty problem from the *Times of New America*. Something deep down inside him responded to this sort of pathetic appeal, however illogical and paradoxical her plea.

"Okay," he said. "There are other machines. We seem to have landed in a food factory. Let's see what they've got to offer."

There was a processor of what appeared to be kitchen scraps, hedge clippings and assorted debris. Another obviously filtered piped sewage from the laboratory into the fresh-water system and a third was fed with new-mown hay. Milk emerged from the rear in plastic containers.

"Milk!" she said.

"If you say so," he answered. He had always wondered where milk came from. The wonders of other people's scientific achievements really made you humble. Who, for instance, had first thought of the idea? He turned the plastic container over in his hand.

"Drinka lotta Gromwold Milk," he read.

He drank. There was a major explosion somewhere outside. Even the underground food processing plant trembled. It was far too big a bang to have been made by the laboratory attendants. Experiments such as "Survival after aurolic holocaust" would have been totally unrealistic. Nothing survived after aurolic holocausts.

"I'd like to know what they're up to out there," he said. "The only weapon I know with a voice like that is the cobalt cannon on my spacecraft."

"There's a ventilator," she said. "Up there over the Taste Bud Stimulating Essence Machine."

She knew it was a Taste Bud Stimulating Essence Machine because the nameplate said so: *Tickle your buds with Gromwold Stimulating Essence, the product of G.S.E. (Intergalactic) Inc. —Even simulated cod's roe tastes like simulated caviar.*

As he climbed the network of pipes and self-reading meters, tubes and flanges, to reach the ventilator, he wondered what exactly caviar was or had been, simulated or otherwise. From the half-open ventilator, he had a good view of the compound outside the laboratory, which gave unrestricted access to the airport.

"They've blown up the administration block," he called down to Marylin. "I never thought Phrix had it in him; it just shows the value of good example. He's gone berserk, just like a real Ad Manager. The Gromwold police are attacking the laboratory guards. The guards haven't a chance against police armaments—no—I thought so—they've bolted. These police boys really know their stuff when it comes to law enforcement. Pay them enough and they'll shoot anybody. Phrix must have really handed out the gubbins."

"What happens," she asked, "if they get through to us?"

"Best thing possible," he told her. "I know these policemen. Once they see you're the boss, they're on your side in a brace of jiffies."

"Are you?" she asked.

"Am I what?"

"The boss?"

Just the sort of damn fool stupid question this damn fool stupid ape would ask. Anyone else would know he was the

boss just by looking at him; why should she doubt it? How come everyone was doubting whether he was the boss all of a sudden? He felt surly and as sore as ulcers.

"We'll see about that," he said. "We'll just see about that when the time comes."

The police force had passed out of his range of vision and had obviously reached the west gates of the laboratory. They would have adequate means at their disposal to blow them open. Once inside the laboratory, what then? There was Kantor and the *Times and Echo* men and the laboratory attendants. The latter would realize that the tide had turned as soon as they were confronted by the Gromwold police. They would go over to the winning side—in the unlikely event that the police would give them the choice of going anywhere. You don't waste the taxpayer's money by having people left over who are going to ask for courts of inquiry and complain about police brutality. The *Times and Echo* men were the real danger. They would have nothing to lose. If Phrix were in charge, he could only maintain his position by obliterating all opposition. To pay two and a half percent to the staff on Gromwold, he would need to dispose of a number of wage earners—Kantor, the highest paid, certainly. The *Times and Echo* would fight it out. How many were there and what weapons did they have? Even small, one-planet publishers maintained a fair supply of armaments and Kantor was ambitious. Ambitions can only be attained by weapons.

There was another ventilator over a machine labeled *Gromwold Sawdust Sausages*. He climbed down from his first coign of vantage and negotiated the difficult ascent to the second ventilator. The machine was old and hot and puffs of aromatic wood-smoke belched from insecure joints and pressure valves. But he was there at last. The aperture looked out over the main corridor of the laboratory. There was a pitched battle in progress.

"No sign of the attendants," he called down to Marylin. "I thought not. They're on the side of the big battalions—the Publisher, Phrix and the Gromwold police. The *Times and Echo* men are fighting it out. Firing from every corner—can you hear the racket down there? The police are letting out the specimens as a screen. It's quite a sight. Most of them don't know what's going on and they're just walking in the way of the capsules—bullets, too, from the look of it—they haven't all got modern weapons. There's a lot of giant creatures ambling around, shaking their arms and roaring. One of them's caught a *Times and Echo* man and pulled his arm from the socket. Trouble is, they're caught between

two fires and they don't even know what bullets are, let alone capsules. There's a lot of pretty, naked nymph-girls climbing the cage bars to get away from it all. Not bad looking—not bad at all. Every now and again, a stray bullet catches one and she pitches down with her hair trailing, like a fighter crashing in flames. Thud on her head! Oh! Now that's really funny! One of the giants has caught one of the girls and he's trying to rape her in the middle of the corridor with missiles whistling all over the place. There's another female trying to drag him off—I didn't know any of these specimens had that sort of community sense. I think she's a conditioned Lesbian or something. Pity! Someone's fired a napalm capsule and they've all three sizzled. The *Times* and *Echo* men are opening the cages too, now. A screen's a screen, whoever uses it. It really is a free-for-all. It's just anyone's game as far as I can see.

"No, wait! They've been outmaneuvered! A squad of policemen has come up a side alley behind them. *Brrm! Brrm! Brrm!* They're all down! Every long-haired, dirty, kinky-lipped man jack of them! All except one . . . it's Kantor and he's bolted around a corner and I can't see where he's gone. It's all over anyway. They'll get him all right and I wouldn't like to be in his shoes when they take him back to their station. They play with them for days. There's the research director—they've got him too! The police are putting him in a cage with a female giantess. That should be great! They're all crowding around to watch and I can't see what she's doing to him.

"So," he said, climbing down. "That's that—Phrix has won. He's in charge, although I never saw him out there. What we've got to do now is get out of here and fix Phrix. He'll still be in the spacecraft, if I know his sort. We've got to get out before the police get tired of their little orgy in the lab and start thinking about what to do next. My guess is they'll opt for Phrix when they've had their fun.

"What's the matter?" he asked, finding her doubled up on the gangway, rocking herself from side to side as if in pain.

"It's horrible," she sobbed.

"What's horrible?" he wanted to know.

"The cruel things they do."

He scratched his head and looked around the factory for something to distract her attention. It was, he remembered, from a course he had once called *The historical rudiments of staff relations*, what one did when women or children began howling and you didn't know what they were howling about. At some time before automation in cooking took over, many centuries ago, the kitchen had apparently been manned

by human or Salumi staff. There were a pair of white overalls hanging from a manual control knob on a simulated coffee dispenser.

"Guaranteed sweetened with genuine cyclamates," the caption read. There was also a chef's high hat and white trousers. He brought them to her and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Clothes," he said. "For you!"

She peered with large, wet eyes through the opened fingers of her hands and the pupils seemed to grow large with wonder. She gave a cry of delight that could have been either human or simian. She took them from him reverently and dried her eyes on the smock sleeve before trying them on.

"Could you turn your back?" she asked shyly.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I don't think you ought to see me dressing."

"You're a woman, all right," and he laughed, pleased at the absurdity of her request. "I don't know if you're man or monkey, but you're female. Of all the three sexes only a woman could be so contagiously cocked-up."

He turned his back until she told him she was ready and there she was, buttoned up, virginally white, with the high hat dented and worn at a jaunty angle. Nervous, shy and a little prim.

"Marvelous!" he said.

"You're very kind," she whispered. She was sobbing quietly from sheer joy. Clothes, to Marilyn, were something much more than a covering to keep out the cold. They are to most people. He was not sure what kindness meant, but it gave him a sort of paternal pleasure to watch her delight in the feel of being clad.

"You're too sensitive," he said gruffly. "They put something very odd in your father's semen, or the teaching machines went haywire."

"Don't you want me to be sensitive?" she said laughing.

It had never before occurred to him to care who felt what or why. You cared that women behaved themselves in the way nature intended, but then, they always did—at least to archexecutives. Laughter? Tears? She was more human than most. Humans don't laugh all that much. They crease their faces, answering grin for grin, but their eyes stay cold. But still, laughter—the Marilyn sort of laughter—is the real criterion of humanity. Homo sapiens—the thinking man. Thinking—so what? Animals think. Maybe. Thinking is only a matter of degree. But here we have the true defining

factor: Homo ridens. The man of laughter. Animals do not laugh.

"I want you to be sensitive," he said. "Now let's get moving!"

"How?"

"What goes in must go out!"

But the processed food in its neat little packages was smaller than the raw material from which it had been made. The wrapped meat slices, the canned milk, the spiced sawdust sausages were spirited away through tiny tunnels and there was no way out. The machinery kept up a steady whirring and the sausage machine puffed intermittent bursts of wood-smoke and garlic and one by one the bodies of the victims from the battle above came clanking down the rollers and into the processor. The staff above was already tidying up the laboratory. Science is nothing if not tidy. Whatever means of exit the cooks had once used, before the self-servicing automation came along, it had long since been closed against any interference with the steady flow of victuals.

Shale switched his communicator to the general purpose wave band for news of the universe. He could think better when listening to the ads. But this time there were no ads. Only an exchange of messages between the Publisher's band and the channels outside.

"Police inspector to Phrix. Shale dead. *Times and Echo* routed. Your position secure. Function of police in clearing passage for march of evolution substantiated. Am returning to ship."

"Research director to Phrix. Acknowledge your position. You are Ad Manager. Never liked Kantor. Remember part played by laboratory staff in any spare editorial. Shale now dead. Kantor discredited. Metita would like to meet you. Get me out of giant nymph cage."

"Resident editor on Gromwold to Phrix. Declare for you. Never liked Shale. Full cooperation all staff. Personnel director would like to talk about pension fund."

"*Times and Echo* on Gromwold to Phrix. Is two and a half percent back-dated?"

"Interval beacon switching on! Your attention please! Time flies! Be wise! Publicize! Time flies! Be wise! Publicize! Time flies . . ."

Shale's finger switched the button to transmit and the prominent blue veins on his mottled face indicated what he was about to say better than any words could have done. Marylin laid a hand on his arm.

"Be wise," she said. "They think you are dead. Why tell them you are not? They will come and look for you."

"What's your I.Q.?" he asked, wonderingly. "You must have a double dose of it somewhere. You don't miss a trick, do you?"

"My I.Q. is quite low, really," she admitted. "The machines used to measure it and whistle. My brain is a few ounces lighter than yours, I expect. It's my A Factor that helps at a time like this. My A Factor, they said, was quite high."

"What's an A Factor?" he asked.

"Adaptability," she told him, surprised that he did not know. "I.Q. rating shows only the basic intelligence. The A Factor shows how far you can apply what little you have."

"That's what's wrong with Phix! Enormous I.Q. and no A Factor. I can't wait to tell him so."

"There's nothing you can do about it," she said. "You're born with so much and nothing will make it any bigger."

"Right!" he said. "Put it to some good use and tell me how to get out of here."

But Marilyn was curling up on the steel gangway and yawning. She could barely stay awake long enough to tell him the trouble.

"It must be night," she whispered. "I've been conditioned to sleep at nightfall when the lights in my cell went out. The stimulus has transferred itself to time. I . . ."

Her eyes were wide and her face contorting spasmodically. She was struggling frantically against the onrush of sleep. There was something she had to say, to tell Shale, to warn him. The thing behind him. Wriggling down the rollers.

"Shale," she gurgled. "Shale—Urrggh!"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, frustrated and more interested in her A Factor than the phenomenon of the organism's struggle against its conditioning.

She groaned a great and agonized groan and with a despairing effort, pointed. Her hand was heavy, tied down with viscous, treacle-threads of sleep and her finger would not extend. But she achieved her object. Shale looked behind him. It was twenty feet long, green, and composed of segments like a string of beads. A foot thick, powerful, flexible, moving in the hooped, peristaltic action of a snake. It twisted off the rollers, arched its forward segments and raised its head, towering a good seven feet high. It had the head of a long-haired, beautiful woman with sad eyes and soft, full lips pouted in a half smile, moistened now and again with the tip of a forked tongue. She looked down at Shale, turning her head from side to side and sighing with

an unbelievable sadness. Slowly, she bent down and, resting her cheek against his, looped a yard of segment over his arm.

Shale responded to the pleading in her eyes, the yearning, and stared back, half-hypnotized. It was not just that she was beautiful, with a captivating, blonde-haired, Salumi-like beauty. It was much more the pleading, siren-like quality in her deep, green, infinitely sad eyes. After all, how do you treat a serpent-woman? As woman or as serpent? She twisted her soft face to meet his eyes full on, nose to nose, and she began to sing with a whispering half-purr, half hiss.

"Stone the flippin' crows," Shale murmured.

For the second time, Marylin fought against an encroaching, paralyzing sleep. She was struggling to shout with all the difficulty of shouting in a dream. You strain your larynx to holler like a whirling dervish for help and all that comes out is a dry croak. She managed just that much and no more and managed it only just in the nick of time.

"Shale!" she croaked.

He responded more to what he knew of her than from any sort of urgency in her voice. Barely had she croaked than he leaped quickly to one side with all the S.F. of a true archexecutive, and where survival factors were concerned, Shale truly had more than his fair share. Even as the serpent-woman looked and smiled at him, her tail arched over like a scorpion's and struck where a moment before he had been standing with such force that the foot long barbed sting splintered the concrete to the depth of three inches.

"You cow!" he shouted, pulling out his pistol and choosing his metaphors with anything but care. "You bloody vicious cow!"

Marylin wanted to stop him, wanted to tell him it wasn't the serpent woman's fault—she had probably been bred to kill; that you can't blame anyone for being what nature had intended that they should be, still less when the functions of nature had been usurped by a bunch of most unnatural laboratory attendants—but this time it was no use. She could manage no sound that was in any way likely to influence an irate Shale with a pistol in his hand. The face looking down the barrel of his weapon took on an even more unhappy expression. It was as if she knew either what pistols were, or more probably, recognized the look of hatred and the ability to act hatefully, balefully evidenced in Shale's eyes. Just before he fired, she burst into tears and as the bullet tore through her neck, she sank to the ground, twisting and turning and sobbing in heartrending anguish before she finally curled into a tidy coil and lay still. Shale kicked her in the face.

"Shale," Marilyn gasped, finding her voice for a moment in the horror of what she had seen. "How could you!"

"How could I what?" he asked, puzzled. "There's still one bullet left."

"Did you," she asked faintly, "did you love your mother, Shale?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, mystified. "What's my mother got to do with anything? She died when I was quite young."

"Perhaps that accounts for it, then." Marilyn sighed. "I'm sorry, Shale. What did she die of?"

It was probably just as well that Marilyn, unable any longer to fight against the inevitability of her conditioning, had closed her eyes and at last given herself up to sleep before Shale replied in his simple direct way.

"I shot her," he said.

Realizing she was not only asleep but likely to remain so until the morning, he picked her up from the hard steel and carried her to the sausage machine. He laid her there gently by a hot pipe on the plastic floor, first taking off the chef's hat and folding it into some sort of pillow.

"Clothes," she whispered in her dreams. "I've got clothes!"

"Stupid animal," he muttered. But he raised her head gently and slipped the pillow underneath. It wasn't much, not even a sign of evolution stirring in a frontal lobe, but for a man who had never been kind to a woman before, it was worthy of notice, if destiny or evolution can ever spare the time away from cosmic happenings to notice anything. Shale puttered around restlessly for a while, trying out the sweetened coffee and eating sausages. Thinking that Marilyn might be frightened when she awoke and saw the snake-woman, he uncoiled her while she was still warm and dragged her up the essence machine to the ventilator. He thrust her head through first and then, heaving on the body like an old-time sailor raising anchor, he hoisted the rest of her and fed it through the opening until gravity took over and she slid away out of sight. That done, he too settled down to sleep. He hesitated at first whether to use Marilyn as a pillow, but some sort of repugnance restrained him and he chose another spot. There was no real need of warmth or comfort in the fully air-conditioned factory.

She brought him coffee in the morning and regretted that there was nowhere to wash. He rummaged in his pocket for his ablutions and handed her the aerosol can and a mirror. She spent a long time combing and spraying herself and

adjusting the hat in front of the mirror. He watched her sardonically.

"Stop preening yourself!" he said at last. "Get that A Factor to work. I've looked around and there's no way out. We certainly can't get back up the rollers."

She handed the ablutions back to him and sat thoughtfully on the gangway. She appeared not to look at anything but just waited for inspiration to come. Archimedes had once done much the same thing in his bath. She did not say "Eureka," but suddenly she smiled.

"Yes?" he asked.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Mind what?"

"I'm only a monk—a hybrid. You won't feel I ought to wait for you to think of something?"

"Listen!" he said. "I'm an archexecutive, aren't I? What have I got to think for? I pay people to do my thinking. Get on with it!"

"Well," she said, diffidently. "I think we should go through the ventilator."

"The ventilator!" He groaned. "Your tiny little mind having nightmares or something? The opening's far too small. Just big enough for the snake-woman. How do we get through that?"

"Is she out there?" Marilyn shuddered.

"Not a chance," he told her cheerfully. "Not with all the Shorne dogs there are around. They'd eat anything."

"It's too horrible!" she said.

"Forget it!" he grumbled. "What about this ventilator you were talking about?"

"Oh yes!" She told him, "It's automatic, you see. It doesn't open any further than that because of the air-conditioning. The temperature in here is constant. If we broke one of those pipes from the sausage machine, the temperature would rise and the ventilator would open further."

"Brilliant!" he said.

He spent the morning pulling and prizing, but the pipes, though centuries old and leaking at every joint, held firm. There was some automatic self-servicing device operating inside. As a fracture appeared, it was welded again before actually breaking.

"What we have to do," she announced, "is to find some means of using the machine for a purpose it was not intended to be used for. It's probably the only way to confuse the process."

"Brilliant again!" he said.

He considered the operation of the machine. The sawdust

arrived under pressure from a pipe in the wall and was blown into a hopper that was constantly half full. It needed, as Marilyn had suggested, something added to the sawdust, something that the machine would reject. Iron filings or a sackful of spanners. But the factory floor was tidy and there was nothing portable that might be used. If there were any spanners anywhere, and there probably were, they were an integral part of each self-servicing machine.

"Your uniform," he suggested.

"No!" she cried, horrified at the thought of parting with her first clothes.

"It's a matter of getting out naked or staying all your life down here with your pants on. There's no future in that!"

"No!" she said. "Shale, I won't!"

"All right!" he grumbled, surprisingly amenable to her wishes. "We'll think of something else."

He was leaning on the gangway, idly watching the supply to the meat processing machine, when the body of a young woman, the victim of some unsuccessful experiment, slipped down the rollers. He was abstractly admiring the young dimpled curve of her buttocks as she trundled by, when her utility as well as her aesthetic value occurred to him. He jumped forward and lifted her from the conveyor, just before the mouth of the processor.

"Ha!"

He threw her over his shoulder and bounded across to the sausage-maker. With a heave, he tossed her headfirst into the hopper. Marilyn screamed and he wondered vaguely what had upset her, but he was too busy watching developments in the sawdust to inquire. It began to sink in the middle and the body tilted toward the slowly turning vortex. In ten minutes it was upright, upside down, and toes inexplicably pointed upward and the head slowly sinking in the direction of the central intake. Down it went and soon only the feet were showing above the sawdust. There was some peculiar action on the leg muscles, because they began moving up and down on their own account like a railway signal. First pointed and then down to right angles. At the same time things began to happen. A hooter sounded short sharp blasts and a red light glowed.

"That's it!" he shouted. "It's the old warning device from when the place was manned. It can't cope with what it's got and it's calling for help."

"That poor girl!" Marilyn was sobbing.

"What poor girl?" he asked, mystified.

Clouds of smoke and steam were now belching from every joint and flange and the smell had changed from garlic and

had taken on a scorched tang like burnt feathers. Suddenly a pipe broke loose and a cloud of hot cellulose pulp with flavor enhancers, mixed spices and indefinable organic material blew outward toward the ventilator. They waited, choking in the steam, and the stench was now definitely of hoof and horn.

"Look!" he gasped.

Marylin had been right. Slowly the ventilator began to open. A new piece of sky appeared, a corner of the roof of some building, drifting cloud, the blue haze of the lower ionosphere, the distant dot of a hovering, predatory angel-stork.

"It worked!" he shouted. "Let's get out of here!"

Avoiding the hot blast, he climbed the essence machine, drew himself up and reached for the aperture.

"Hooray!" he roared.

With a heave he was swinging from the still-opening shutter, and drawing his knees up to his chin, he was feet-first through the opening. He dropped and seized the bottom edge.

"Come on," he shouted and let himself fall to the ground, landing on all fours. Unhurt, he scrambled to his feet and found himself looking down the muzzle of an energy pistol.

"Holy Asgard," said the constable. "It's Shale!"

Inside, Marylin was climbing the machine with difficulty. Although philogenetically she belonged partly to an agile species, her lifelong confinement in a small cage had made her slow and ungainly. She had never, in fact, climbed anything. Her machine physical-educator had believed in machine exercise, being thus able to control the right amount exactly, rather than most of us less fortunate outside, who usually have either too much or too little. There was one thing, however, her educators had neglected altogether: to provide her ears with something to develop her basically acute hearing. All sounds in her cell had been of equal intensity and she was no longer able, like her simian ancestors, to interpret the degree of danger in a footstep or a rustle in the undergrowth. As she struggled to pull herself up the side of the G.S.E. (intergalactic) machine, she did not notice that one body, rattling down the rollers to the food processor, slipped off before it reached the flaps. That it had climbed noiselessly from the gangway and was creeping up behind her. That it was standing there, hands on hips, watching her struggles sardonically. As she at last reached up for the uppermost pipe, preparatory to pulling herself to the top, a hand closed around her leg and pulled her down again.

"By the Incorporated Practicioners in Advertising themselves!" Kantor said, "it's a bloody monkey!"

"Please," Marylin begged, "don't call me that."

"And it talks," he said. "So you're Shale's new girlfriend. Just what he needs. He's no more than a dirty ape himself. So he's gone through the ventilator, has he? Well! Well! Left you here all on your loneliness? This time, I'm going to get friend Archexecutive Shale!"

He struck Marylin savagely in the face with his pistol butt and climbed the machine. Marylin, desperately wiping the blood from her eyes, threw her arms around his legs and held on. He turned and struck her a stunning blow on the crown of her head. Her grip loosened and she sank to the ground. The chef's hat, streaked with blood, slipped from her hand, as with her last effort to retain consciousness, she attempted to hold it in place.

"We'll soon fix you, you ugly ape," Kantor said. He climbed down and, seizing her by the neck, dragged her to the conveyor belt.

"Do you know how stupid you look in clothes?" he shouted, slapping her face to bring her back far enough into life to hear him. "A brute beast trying to look like a human and as hideous as a pig in trousers. Down the belt with you, you hairy monster!"

He climbed on to the gangway, reached down and pulled her up by the hair. Picking her up in his arms, he tossed her into the processing machine.

"Pork," he screamed, "that's what you'll come out as! Monkey cutlets!"

Shale was not very bright intellectually, but when it came to dealing with policemen, he had few equals. The particular member of the force who now confronted him was stupid even for a Gromwold constable. So Shale had no difficulty in distracting his attention by the oldest trick in the universe. As the policeman chivied him with the muzzle of his pistol, Shale grinned and pointed over his shoulder. The policeman turned and Shale shot him in the back.

"Lout!" he said, kicking him in the face as a post mortem reproof. He was bending down and retrieving the pistol and unbuckling the bandolier with the energy capsules when he heard Marylin scream. It was either an ape or a human scream; there is little difference in times of terror.

"What is it?" he called. There was no reply. He scratched his head. Why would she scream? A mouse? Hardly. Where there were serpent-women slithering down conveyors, there might just as well be mice, but Marylin was not the type to yell without good cause.

"Marylin!" he shouted.

Still no reply. The ventilator was out of reach and the wall was rendered with a toughened concrete and was quite smooth. There was, however, the policeman's body and even one or two segments of the snake-woman that the dogs had found inedible. He doubled the policeman up, head between his feet, and slapped two snake segments on his back. Scrambling up, he was just able to reach the aperture. Pistol between his teeth, he pulled himself up. As he squeezed through the ventilator he was in time to see Kantor turning to face him and Marylin's legs disappearing through the processor flaps. After that he was not very clear what happened. Kantor crouched, pointed his pistol, and began firing. In his utter fury, Shale never thought of returning the fire. In times of stress Shale acted, as do most people, by returning to the ways of childhood, in his case to the tough little advertising colony on Lemos, where, if anyone showed signs of incipient executive material in their work or play, you recognized them for what they were—potential dangers to you—and treated them accordingly. You knocked the executive material out of them. When you'd finished thumping them they were very menial and intending to stay that way and keep out of trouble.

Instead of taking cover and returning the fire like a good soldier, Shale took his pistol by the barrel and, using it as a club, leaped at Kantor, fists, pistol, feet, knees and elbows flailing. The essence machine was a good thirty feet high and when Shale landed, it was with the force of an exploding thunderbolt. How it was that not a single Kantor bullet made contact is one of those inexplicable facts of warfare. Heroic tactics do not exactly make one invulnerable but they go a long way toward it. Probably the enemy's hand shakes from the sheer terror of looking at you, bawling and waving your battle-ax and painted with woad. Shale was not painted with woad, but when anyone upset him, his mottled, florid face took on the color of ox liver and the veins and cheeks extended like a cow's udder overdue for milking in some zoological enclave. As he landed, he smashed Kantor's head against the gangway rail with one hand and pulled Marylin back with the other. The hair on the crown of her head, which he noticed for the first time was overlong for an ape's, showed some signs of singeing and she had been liberally sprayed with a basting oil. Otherwise she was no worse physically. Mentally, it was another matter. She clung to Shale with a clawing desperation. Her long fingers tore at his hair, the strong nails scratched his face and she sank her surprisingly small, white, human teeth

deep into his shoulder. He was hardly able to thrust her away long enough to pick up the groaning Kantor and toss him on to the conveyor.

"Cut it out!" he said gruffly. "It's finished now. You're all right, aren't you?"

"He said I was an ugly ape!" she said between sobs.

"Did he, now?" He bent over the rail to give Kantor's feet a vicious shove, accelerating his passage into the processor. There was a muffled scream from somewhere inside and Kantor vanished with a last despairing kick.

"Kantor's a peasant," he said, adding as the screaming ceased, "at least, he was."

"You shouldn't have done that," she whispered, becoming suddenly calmer. "You needn't have put him in there."

"I'll go around the other end and eat him for a nickel," he said, cheerfully. "It's you I'm concerned about."

She sat disconsolately on the gangway, rubbing, not very effectively, at the basting oil. The white smock was splashed with blood and yellow stains and the off-white trousers had slipped about her ankles.

"It was silly of me to put them on," she said sadly, unbuttoning the smock, the human feeling of shame at dressing before him forgotten in the misery of renunciation. "Of course I look ugly and stupid in clothes. I'm not really a woman—I just feel like one, but I know I look like something else. I shouldn't try to be something I'm not.

"Just for a little while," she said, as the tears began to flow again, "I felt like a real woman. You can't imagine how I used to long for clothes in my cell. To dress up and comb my hair. Ever since the day the machines first described clothes to me—it was like showing a caged bird a nest in a tree. Well, it's all over now. I'm glad it was Kantor who told me and not you. You were very understanding."

"I'd like to pull Kantor out just to push him back in again," he said.

She wiped her face with the discarded smock and managed to smile.

"It wouldn't make any difference," she said. "It's been said now. The truth has to come out somehow in the end. It was only a little illusion I had. I'll get over it."

He went to the delivery end of the machine and took the packets as they emerged, steaming and smelling slightly of nutmeg. He didn't know which packets contained Kantor, but he threw them all on the floor and jumped on them.

"Now," he said breathlessly, as the machine appeared to be, for the moment, empty. "That's the Kantor episode over. We're going out now and we're taking over my space-

craft, Phrix or no Phrix, Gromwold police or no Gromwold police. And when we get to somewhere civilized, or even before that, right here in Lulonga, I'm getting you clothes—do you hear? Not an old chef's outfit, but the best clothes in the universe, right bang up to the last minute finery. And you're going to wear them and like them and if anyone says you shouldn't, I'll personally break him in little pieces and cut his liver out. Now get up and get going."

"You're very good," she said.

"I'm the biggest bastard in the universe," he shouted. "But no one's going to make a monkey out of my girlfriend."

It was an unfortunate choice of metaphor, but Marilyn, overcome with the significance of the word "friend," hardly noticed.

The teaching machines had filled the gaps between the rest periods of loneliness, but they had never really been her friends. It is possible to have an enormous affection for a machine, but somehow you never get as close to the best and most understanding of them as you do to a very much intellectually inferior and insignificant human—or animal—of one's own kind. She had long felt the need not just to talk and receive always a well thought out and concise reply, but to feel the presence of something less well-informed, groping like herself for an answer, and conscious of its own inadequacy. And now Shale, neither groping nor inadequate, but at the same time far less intellectually perfect than the machines, had called her his friend. She felt almost able to walk on air to the ventilator in spite of her aching head and the blood that had matted in the light down on her chin and shoulders.

Shale was now tolerably well armed with both the policeman's energy pistol and Kantor's personal protection job, the former unlikely to be accurate after its misuse as a club. Shale tucked them both into his smock belt and pulled himself up to the ventilator and peered through the aperture. There was no one in sight. Two Shorne dogs were worrying the body of the Gromwold policeman. As he let himself down, they took a leg apiece and began a tug-of-war to the accompaniment of growls, howls and that high-pitched whistling in the upper register peculiar to Shorne dogs. Dangling from the wall, he kicked them away and let himself down on to the corpse, taking Marilyn on his shoulders and stooping to allow her to step off gently.

"All right," he said, "now to my spacecraft!"

It was about a mile to the airstrip. A mile of completely flat surface, faced with Shorne marble slabs and used mostly for parades and demonstrations. The Shornians were great

demonstrators and since all such spontaneous gatherings were by law in favor of the government, the ruling classes were at pains to provide every encouragement and a setting worthy of its people's lion heart. Shale's spacecraft was thus clearly visible, pointing skyward, gleaming and pencil-shaped, not far from the smoking ruins of the administration block. The sight of it was an inspiration to Shale, who set out for it at a brisk trot, heedless of strategy or cover, thinking only of Phrix and what he would do to him when he had him at the wrong end of his pistol. He had taken only a few steps, however, when the motors opened up with a burst of shimmering auron particles. They bellied under the craft in a wide, onion-like ovoid, hazily there and not there, like heat lines over sun-scorched hay. The curved contours straightened and the ovoid, with the ship on its crown, became a cylinder. With the impetus of force-field elongation beneath it, the craft rocketed skyward with the acceleration of light from its source, or very nearly. It was out of sight behind the three ionospheres in two blinks of an eyelid.

"The three-headed thieving jerk!" Shale shouted, firing his pistol in frustrated impotence at the point in the sky where hazy pink ionized smoke rings were slowly widening.

"We're stranded on Shornel!" he groaned. Testily, he shot the Shorne dogs that were howling, whistling and fighting over the body of the policeman.

"It doesn't follow," she said.

"What doesn't?" he wanted to know, blowing the smoke from the barrel of his gun.

"Kantor must have a craft somewhere," she said.

"You're right!" he agreed. "So darned right!"

In the area of what had been the administration block was a milling crowd of officials and armed men. The yellow uniforms of the Shorne police were in evidence now that the blue of Gromwold was gone. They were searching the ruins and shouting instructions to each other through loud hailer.

"We'd better move," he said, "and fast. The research director has declared for Phrix. He's lucky he could declare for anyone after the Gromwold boys got him. I wouldn't give much for my chances if he found out I was still alive."

"Stand and identify!" someone shouted, and a warning shot splintered a gaping hole in the wall behind them.

"Run!" Shale ordered. "No Shorne policeman can ever hit a running target at more than a hundred yards."

He was right. As they ran, large lumps of masonry disintegrated from the roofs and walls of buildings around them, but they crossed the wide open square to the main entrance of the airport unscathed. Looking back as they ran through

the gates. Shale noted that the policemen had abandoned their wild fusillade and were climbing into a jet-hovercraft and setting out in pursuit. The gates themselves, surprisingly enough, were unguarded. Outside there was a wide carriageway and on the far side of the carriageway there was a high wall built of highly polished, square black slabs of impermeable Gromwold igneous jeggstone. They ran helter-skelter down the road, spurred on by the loud buzzing of the police launch and, shortly before the nick of time, arrived at a gateway with thick wooden, iron-studded gates and a small door in the main frame. The small door was open. They climbed through and shot the bolts behind them.

LULONGA CITY NECROPOLIS

It stood out in large black letters on a white board for the information of visitors. The Publisher, or the Publisher's representatives, had not been idle. Beneath the notice, on either side, were two messages, well-displayed on the glass panels of illuminated point-of-sale cabinets. Each letter was a different color and staggered at angles above and below the line of setting to give an effect of lighthearted jollity, in the "sell with smiles" idiom of contemporary psychology.

DEATH ABSOLVES—WE DISSOLVE
Johnson's of Lulonga—aromatic acids
DISSOLUTION IS NO SOLUTION
Butterworths of Shorne—reducing pickles

As far as Shale and Marylin could see to the left and to the right and stretching away into the distance before them were rows of birdbath-like stone altars about three feet high. On the center of each bird-table was a glass jar containing either colored liquid, or, suspended by a platinum wire from the neck, a tiny wizened body about the size and texture of a pickled walnut. There were corrosive-resistant brass labels on each.

JABLICK—*Pickled AE 20,961*
ROWCOCK—*Dissolved AE 20,855*

A ravishing Salumi beauty in white tights emerged from the gate-lodge and undulated toward them, her nipples peeping prettily skyward from rocking white breasts at every step. A card held by a large hairpin on the upsweep of her elaborate coiffure bore the legend: *Johnson's Provides the Solution.*

"Where is the D.D.?" she asked. Her voice hovered around middle C on a cello relaxo-tuner.

"Come again?" Shale asked.

"The Dear Departed," she purred. "We always call them the D.D.'s at Johnson's. It's more—well—in keeping, isn't it?"

"No Dear Departed," Shale told her, his eyes on an area of pink-white dimpled cleavage. He went through the motions of expectorating a kiss at what seemed a worthwhile target.

"Sorrowing, then?" she asked, surprised.

"Not sorrowing."

"Souvenirs?"

"No souvenirs."

"You're wasting my time!" The voice changed from cello C to metallic upper B flat. "I'm on commission. I don't chatter with morbid neuroghouls."

"Neuroghouls?" Marilyn asked. "What is a neuroghoul?"

"They haunt the places of death." Shale grinned. "Didn't your teachers tell you? I wouldn't mind," he said, turning to the Johnson's girl, "getting my mitts around you and seeing how you dissolve."

In the road outside a police siren wailed and he rather regretfully laid the cold muzzle of his pistol on her navel.

"Just now," he said, "we're interested in acids. Show us the works, voluptuous!"

"Don't shoot me!" she begged. "I'll do anything. I'm terribly afraid of death."

"Why?" he asked. "What have you got to live for that's so special?"

"It's not the living," she said, trembling. "It's the dying and being put in the acid bath and poured into a bottle. I've seen it so often, I can't believe it will happen to me one day."

"With a body like yours," he returned with a grin, "I should think they'd pickle you. You'd look rather nice as a walnut. Now, get inside there and stop blubbering."

Inside the lodge doors was a comfortable room with air-conditioning, chairs and colored liquids in jars arranged tastefully on shelves. There were a few pictures on the walls illustrating the speed of dissolution and accompanied by suitable explanatory captions:

"Anarubic Acid. Note the peaceful repose of the D.D. as all wrinkles disappear in a trice. The final disintegration of the body will be unnoticed in an effervescence of blue bubbles."

"Ridivinsic Aktane in handy corrosive-resistant wrappings.

Readily soluble. Quick acting and leaves no sediment. Try one in *your* D.D.'s final bath."

"Where's it done?" Shale asked.

"Downstairs." She nodded to a doorway partially concealed behind cardboard representations of D.D.s quietly and seraphically recumbent after pre-mortem assurances of Johnson's acid baths. "We call it the soup-kitchen," she confessed.

"Down!" he ordered. "And quick about it!"

Outside, the police had driven their jet-car full tilt into the necropolis gates. The rams on the bumpers had burst the hinges and they were clattering through the opening, pistols poised.

"Right!" Shale ordered. "Behind the bath, you two. As they come down the stairs, I'll pick them off."

"Not the bath!" the Salumi girl wailed. "I'm scared of the bath!"

Marylin comforted her with a quiet whisper in her ear: "Don't cross him, dear," she said. "Shale's the sort of man who will put you inside it if you don't do what he says."

In her own way, Marylin was proud of Shale.

There were only four policemen, who were ill-advised enough to run down the stairs into the soup-kitchen, one behind the other. It was asking for a demonstration of marksmanship. Shale fired one energy capsule and brought them all tumbling to the floor together. He picked them up, one at a time, and tossed them in the bath. They vanished, as the advertisement had promised, in an effervescence of blue bubbles. The Salumi girl was still squatting behind the bath covering her eyes and ears with her hands. He slapped her heartily on the shapely buttocks that were protruding inadvertently over its edge.

"Come on!" he said to Marylin. "Move!"

"Shale," she asked, hurrying behind him down the main avenue of altars, "don't you care?"

"Care?" he threw over his shoulder. "Care?"

She held on to the tail of his smock, tugging to slow the urgency of his stride.

"About those policemen. Didn't you feel anything at all when you threw them in the bath?"

He reached out and grasped her by the scruff of the neck and propelled her along at a jog-trot in front of him.

"Get a move on," he said. "We've got to get to that ship. I don't know what you mean by 'care.' It was up to them to care. I'd care if it were me. It wasn't me, so I'm laughing."

"I wish you could feel." She sighed. "I wish you could care, just a little."

"You're a funny old monkey." He laughed affectionately.

In front of them they saw their first neuroghoul. He was on his knees, staring fixedly in wide-mouthed wonder at a tiny walnut-brown woman in a bottle. His eyes were glazed and gloating and, from time to time, he went through the motions of wetting his lips with a rough, dry tongue. He looked much as neuroghouls had always looked. At public executions and, in the days when executions were no longer public, at gatherings by the notice on prison doors. Delight at the rope become verbal. He had been found, too, at funerals and at sites of violent crimes. Anywhere where death had become sordid enough to fascinate.

Shale emptied a jar of crimson fluid over him in passing. The jar was labeled: *JOACOMO. Dissolved AE 20,701*. It was quite old and its antiquity fascinated him.

"What is A.E.?" he asked suddenly.

"After Earth," she told him.

"Pity about Earth!" he said.

They were making their way to a small gateway in the necropolis wall at a safe distance from the airport gates. With luck they might cross the road and reenter unobserved from the rear. Kantor's craft would be somewhere near the house on the hill; manned or unmanned, guarded or unguarded, they did not know.

"We'll play it by ear when we get there," Shale said.

Before they reached the gate, however, it was throw open and a naked man exploded into the necropolis. Slamming the door behind him, he ran through the rows of altars, coursing to left and right at a speed a leopard might have envied. Long, matted hair trailed behind him and his breathing, as he passed them without a sign of recognition, was a dry, painful whistle. Far in the distance was the sound of posthorns, humming of jets, baying of hounds, shouts and laughter.

"It's a hunt," Shale said. "If we stand behind that black Poor Man's Cyprus by the wall, we can watch. No one will notice us until after the kill."

"But why?" she asked.

"Why what?"

"Why are they hunting the poor man?"

"Sport, of course. It's one of the few active old pastimes left. What did those machines teach you?"

"But what has he done?"

"Done?" he asked. "What should he have done? He's been bred for the chase. Hare hormones or stimulants or something. Antelope serum. What did you think they hunted -foxes?"

"They used to do that," she recalled out loud. "And it was horrible."

"Not much fun with foxes. A good fast man makes a much better quarry. More intelligent. Look at him! Spilling the acid from the jars to cover his scent! Coursing to throw them off! What are you looking so miserable about?" he asked, as she turned away, hiding her face behind the black foliage of the cyprus. "When you turn the corners of your mouth down you look like a sulky frog. Hunting was one of the first things men did when they learned to make weapons. Of course it gives everyone pleasure. It's deep down inside us. It's the thing that first put us on top. It made us superior to the—oh, well. Have it your own way!"

The quarry was a good half mile from the gate and running strongly when the hounds came through in full cry, followed by the huntsmen on their jet-cycles, soaring over the wall with horns blowing, cheering and tallyho-ing.

"They're enjoying themselves," Shale said. "Do you want to stop their simple pleasures?"

"I'm thinking of the hunted," she said, "not the huntsmen."

"He enjoys it too, really. Everyone says he does, so he must. They won't kill him if he gives them a good run."

"But if the dogs get him!"

"They usually take the dogs off him and cut his throat. They're quite humane really."

The hunt passed out of sight into the distance and they came out from behind the black Cyprus and made their way to the road, which appeared now to have run into a shopping center. They crossed over and Shale helped himself to a *Lemos Galactic Monitor* from an auto-newsvendor. It was a locally printed Shorne edition and he went purple with rage at the first glance. There was nearly a half column of plain editorial among the newsads on the front page. This in itself was inconceivable and a break with long-standing tradition. It would have been quite impossible in the universal edition. News items are woven only into advertisements. But the subject matter was worse.

SHAME ON SHORNE, it was headed.

The text was of no consequence, since no one read any further than the headlines on any subject. But the lead-in was in sufficiently heavy type to catch the eye of even the most casual observer: CIVILIZED CONSCIENCE REJECTS THE LABORATORIES !!!

"Phrix," he shouted. "What does Phrix think he's doing to my papers!"

"He's changing the universe," she said.

"What does Phrix know about conscience?" he stormed.

"He's a Groil. Conscience is a human, Ruling Race affair. It's the thing that tells us what is custom and what isn't custom. We—the Ruling Races. What *we* do and don't do. Not what someone else does or doesn't want to do. We accept laboratories, so laboratories can't be on our conscience. How can a Groil or anyone else tell us what we should reject?"

"A thing can be bad in itself," she said. "Whether we do it or not."

"You're talking like an ape," he said. "How can anything be bad unless someone says it is? Badness is stepping out of line; there's nothing absolute about it. And we make the line we don't step out of. What's bad in one generation may be good in the next, if opinion changes. But you don't mold opinion; it's rooted in custom. We used to hunt foxes, like you said, and then it was good. Now we don't because men are cheaper and give us a better run. So now it's bad to hunt foxes. And it's bad to put editorial on the front page. It would have been bad enough as a newsad. No one puts editorial on the front page."

"How would you have done it?" she asked tactfully. "If you had wanted the Shorne laboratories to advertise and they wouldn't and you wanted to put them out of business?"

"Ah!" he said, pride in his craft overriding his resentment. "That's different. I would have done it properly and not on the front page. Worded it into someone else's ad as a promotional news item. Something like: 'Hugger's gin-easy on the pocket—Avoid Shorne laboratories—they don't stock it,' or something like that."

"Brilliant!" she said.

"It is, rather. Look," he continued. "They've done it here. Now that's the work of an editor who knows his job. You see! There's been an earthquake on Jomrod. But you don't find that out—supposing you want to—without reading the Adam's Analgesic ad. 'Feeling tired, run-down, shaky—like the earth at 0705 Gromwold time yesterday on Jomrod? You need an Adam's Analgesic to put life into you! Life that 2000 people on Jomrod haven't got any more. They won't need Adam's Analgesic—you will! It's got what it quakes!'"

"I see," she said, adding as an afterthought, "you haven't paid for the paper."

"Paid for the paper?" he asked in amazement. "Haven't you ever heard of controlled circulations? The advertiser pays for the paper. The higher the circulation, the more you can charge him. The Lemos *Galactic* has a distribution of a thousand billion. We wouldn't have a couple of thousand if anyone had to buy it.

"A dozen cigars!" he shouted into the service microphone.

"Jomrod Jasmine Hallucinatory Whiffs. I'll smoke them on the way to Lemos when we get that ship of Kantor's," he explained to Marylin.

He slipped his credit card through the counter scrutinizer and the packet slipped down the supply tube. He crammed it into the breast pocket of his smock.

"Now," he said, "to get you some clothes!"

The shops along the street side opposite the necropolis wall were all of uniform three-story height and built of square Shorne concrete blocks. Each one bore an illuminated name-board in the center of the third story, stretching the length of the establishment itself.

TROUBADOR'S TOYS FOR TINIEST TOTS

It was the next establishment and the window display comprised a large and varied assortment of miniature energy pistols, hatchets, thumbscrews, death-masks and a "Girl's Own Dissolution Kit." The contents were shown under the caption, *Dissolve your dolly in Anarubic acid*, and a funerary jar was supplied, labeled *Just like Grandma*.

They made their way down the street and Marylin averted her eyes from Pitman's Pornographic Posters. Most of them were animated and extracts were projected on home-movie screens. The display read, *I thought my boy friend was impotent until he saw Pitman's production of Pamela's Passion—Credit card entry canceled if not satisfied*.

There was also a pet shop with man-hounds and tame vultures and a book shop displaying only one thousand copies of the same work: *100,000 Years of Torture*. A small sign announced that a genuine police whip was supplied free with every copy.

"There it is," Shale said. He pointed to a building bearing the sign **DRESS TO KILL**. But on closer inspection they found it stocked only hunting tights and scarlet capes.

The couturier was further still and uncomfortably near to the airport. It was divided into two halves: footwear under the legend, *If you were in our shoes*, and gowns under, *Full coverage on sure foundations*.

Marylin hesitated at the doors. She was trembling and near to tears. Excitement at the thought of once again being clad in real clothes was equally matched by the fear of looking foolish and the dread of a shop girl's contempt. The couturier was one of the few shops with real live assistants and they were hovering in the corners, severe and contemptuous, in one-piece gowns and wearing their hairdos like helmets.

"They'll think I'm ugly," she whispered.

Shale flicked his gold-colored credit card, the symbol of a million dollars, from his pocket.

"They'll think this is beautiful," he said. "In we go!"

It was a tall and willowy salesgirl who approached them and her regulation once-piece uniform was skintight and woven from a filmy, semi-transparent fabric. Over her regulation hairdo, she wore a wide brimmed hat molded in a loop like the orbital path of a comet. Her long eyelashes drooped for a moment as she glanced at the credit card and then, as Shale had predicted, lifted to uncover smiling eyes, radiating warmth and friendliness to Marilyn.

"Madame would prefer to begin at the beginning?" she asked. "Panties, girdle and et ceteras?"

"Please," Marilyn whispered, a hot tingling under the down of her cheeks that in a human would have produced a blush. "Anything you say."

"You don't need a bra, really," the assistant noted, with an appraising eye. "Many ladies would envy your remarkably—sturdy—development. However, I think we should say bra, for the sake of form." She smiled at her own plagiarizing from the current advertisement. "Now what had madame in mind for the general ensemble?"

"I want," said Marilyn, "clothes."

"Yes, madame, but what sort of clothes?"

"To cover every inch of me. Every inch. It's the hair, you see."

"High boots. Pantaloon. Smock buttoning to the neck, belted at the waist. Snug fitting astronaut-type hat, possibly with veil. Gloves."

"It sounds entrancing."

"Madame should try depilatories!" the assistant whispered, as Marilyn, in a frenzy of excitement, tried on a succession of hats but avoided studying their effect in the mirror.

"What are depilatories?"

"They remove hair very effectively. I would not suggest their use but for the fact that madame's skin appears to be pink and unblemished under the—er—down."

"It would really remove my hair?"

"Certainly, madame. We stock all the usual brands."

"I'll try it," Marilyn whispered. "I wonder," she added. "Could you advise me? I had thought of plastic surgery. Could a plastic surgeon alter my face?"

"I am sure the nose could be remolded."

"And my mouth made less wide? And could he give me lips?"

Shale was at a safe distance, lounging by the door and

puffing at the Jamrod Jasmine Hallucinogen. He was smiling, watching a dream image form framed in a smoke ring. The assistant softened toward Marilyn to a degree not altogether accounted for by Shale's credit card.

"Madame, I take it, is from the laboratories?"

"Yes—a hybrid."

"It presents difficulties for you. I should certainly consult a plastic surgeon at the first opportunity. You are not very familiar with the world of Shorne or the universe?"

"I have very little direct experience."

"Perhaps I might offer a word of warning in regard to men. The gentleman appears to be a very normal and uncomplicated man. Use the depilatory only a little at a time so that the hair disappears slowly. That way, he will not notice. Men are very conservative, madame. He might be unreasonably angry at finding you looking different one day from the way you had looked the day before. Being basically unobservant, no man will notice a change that creeps up on him gradually. You would be quite safe, even with plastic surgery, if your face was changed only a little at a time."

"Thank you!" Marilyn smiled. She had finished her dressing and ran to the door to show herself to Shale.

"You look marvelous!" he said. Her face fell when she realized that he was in fact speaking to a dream image.

"Never mind." The assistant comforted her. "He will really think you look marvelous after the cigar. I hope you have an understanding. You know what men are after narcotics—or do you?"

"No!" Marilyn gasped, really frightened at the thought. There were some subjects the machines had not covered.

Shale was certainly more affable than usual as they left the shop. He looked at Marilyn and said "Hm!" and chucked the assistant under the chin as a parting gesture. Marilyn badly wanted him to approve of her choice; the excitement she felt at dressing for herself was nothing compared to her desire to please him. Even if, as the assistant had hinted, the narcotic might . . . but, in any case, why not? Shale was the only man in the world for her.

"You're sure you like it?" she asked. "I can change it if you say so."

"It's fine," he said.

"Should I keep the veil down?" she asked. "It covers my face and people don't notice."

"Don't notice what?" he asked.

She had wanted him to say, "Don't cover your face," but his apparent indifference as to whether it was covered or not was the next best thing. She took his arm shyly.

"You don't think I look silly?"

"No," he said, "you look all right."

All at once she saw the cause of his abstraction. His eyes were on the next building, which stood out from the rest of the street like a vision of Asgard in the Outer Darkness. Its concrete blocks were painted a bright yellow and the door and window frames were mauve. There were multi-colored zigzag patterns radiating from the title board which read: LULONGA CITY BROTHEL—YOU WANT IT—WE GOT IT.

"Just what I need," Shale said. "Come along."

She pleaded, "I can't go in there!"

"Of course you can. There's always a waiting room. You can read the papers."

"Must you?" she asked dolefully. She knew about brothels from her teachers, but the machines had been reticent about the manner of their use and the etiquette involved. She had imagined that one went there secretly and took one's time, that it was in some way a matter of importance to the user, calling for tact and discretion.

"I won't be more than five minutes," he said. "That Salumi lass in the bone-yard put ideas in my head."

He was as good as his word. He took her to the waiting room, decorated with a few mildly erotic pictures advertising perfumes, deodorants and aphrodisiacs in aerosol containers. *Use Lulonga Love Mist and Keep your Man at Home*, she read. *Saphos of Shorne unite—You have nothing to lose but your swains—Shorne Sapphic Society. Membership ten dollars.*

Shale disappeared at a jog-trot up the escalator, leaving Marilyn seated disconsolately under an illustrated slogan *For Virgin Breasts, Shamrock's is best. Shamrock's reducing Salve*. She was shortly joined by a jolly, buxom woman, whose generous curves rippled under a nightdress of some synthetic fiber only slightly less transparent than glass.

"Coffee?" she asked. "Or a little something to pep you up a bit?"

"No, thank you," Marilyn answered, fidgeting nervously in her chair and hoping that Shale would hurry.

The well-proportioned hostess considered her with carefully calculating eyes.

"Thank you?" she said. "Thank you's are a bit old-fashioned these days, aren't they? Where have you been hiding yourself? You're only part human, aren't you?"

"Yes," Marilyn confessed.

"The laboratories, of course? You're not looking for a job are you?"

"What sort of a job?" Marilyn asked.

"What sort of a job!" The woman laughed. "Well, it's not hard work for those that are cut out for it but the hours are a bit irregular. I suppose you're normal sexually?"

"I don't know," Marilyn whispered. "I've never tried. But I couldn't—I couldn't do anything like that—I'd hate it."

"Pity! It's not that bad, you know. I just close my eyes and think of all the money I'm saving and it's all over before you've time to notice."

"I think it's horrible!"

"Well, there's no accounting for taste, I suppose. I could have used you. A lot of the customers are getting a bit jaded and dissatisfied. They'd have a go at anything outlandish or bizarre. They'd pay well for someone like you."

"I know—an ape."

"There's no harm in being an ape, dear. None of us can help our parents. Some of the customers here are worse than apes, I can tell you. No monkey ever gets up to the tricks they do."

"Please," Marilyn begged. "I'd rather not hear about it. Don't tell me any more."

The hostess waddled to the door, then turned and looked at Marilyn archly.

"You want to get some practice in, love," she said. "If you want to keep that man of yours out of here. You think about it."

Five minutes were barely over when Shale, as good as his word, came running down the stairway whistling. He smacked the brothel keeper heartily on the bottom and put his arm around Marilyn.

"We're in luck," he said. "Do you know what I saw from the window?"

"No, what?" she replied.

"My girls must be getting slack," the brothel keeper grumbled. "What were you doing looking out of the window? Who did they give you up there?"

"No idea." He shrugged. "There was someone on a bed. I never looked at her. How do we get out to the parking place?"

"The back door."

"Good!" He hurried Marilyn in the direction she had indicated.

"Guess what?" he whispered when they were out of ear-shot. "I might have known where Kantor would park his craft. It's right here on the brothel parking strip!"

"Is there anyone in it?" she asked.

"There soon won't be," he promised, cocking his pistol.

But there was no need for weapons. The door to the craft

was open and the retractable gangway to the ground in place. The ship was empty. The crew had either perished in the skirmish with the Gromwold police or they were still out looking for Kantor. They climbed aboard and Shale checked the fuel supplies and medicaments, a task normally carried out by the auto-handlers at every airport. All was in order. The ship was stocked for a long voyage and everything was in its place.

"Can you drive it?" she asked.

"Drive?" He laughed. "I can pilot anything. Anyone can. Controls are standard and simple enough."

He pressed a button labeled "Gangway Retract" and the gangway retracted. There were two couches under a control panel so constructed that, as the pilot and couch were drawn backward against the hydraulic buffers as the ship accelerated, the panel followed and remained within arm's reach. Not that it was possible to raise an arm in the initial four hours of acceleration. In the first place, no one could lift a finger at 120 G (Universal), and in the second place, no one was ever conscious to try.

Shale handed Marylin her anti-G tablet with instructions to belt down and swallow. In five seconds, she was secure in a state of deep coma. He settled down himself, swallowed a tablet, set the automatic direction finger to Lemos and pressed the takeoff button. The elongating force field lifted the ship clear of the parking place and the motors opened up. Liquid anti-matter was fed into the combustion chamber and mixed with fifty percent matter in the form of kerosene. The resultant explosion produced a stream of high velocity auron particles and the ship set out at a steady rate of acceleration that would ultimately level off in four hours' time just below the speed of light. Thereafter the acceleration curve would be less steep and the pilot could return to consciousness. Full speed would eventually be maintained in a ship of the Kantor class at around 10L and movement about the cabin would then be possible.

Lemos was five light-years distant from Shorne and the journey would take six months.

As Marylin and Shale returned to consciousness, Marylin's first thought was that they were alone together. For six months there would be only the restricted space in a craft much smaller than Shale's company job which was now also on its way to Lemos with Phrix aboard. A small craft and Shale. Her second thought was the reason for their destination. Why Lemos?

"I'll get that horned goat Phrix, if it's the last thing I do," Shale told her.

Shale would kill Phrix, she thought, and the Publisher would accept Shale's appointment for the second time by assassination. It seemed a small thing to kill Phrix and Shale was not a little man. It seemed the wrong way to run a business, although the system had the precedent of long-standing tradition. Captains of industry and government achieved their success by virtue of their ruthlessness rather than their suitability as examples to the rest.

The universal standards, Marilyn thought, were wrong. This was not the way to run a universe. Should not the meek have inherited it? Someone had once said they ought and would. She knew from her history teachers that it had not always been as bad as this. There had been a time, a few centuries ago, when an organization needed some ethical standards at least to maintain its own coherence and efficiency. Industrialists and their staffs had once been subject to the same laws as the ordinary consumers. That had been before B91. Since then, industrial empires had grown and government had in the end become a function of one department of the commercial consortia. First from Asgard itself and then, as the Presidents—the Publisher, the Chemist, and Metallurgist, the Engineer, the Comestible, the Krupp—became more remote, power had been relegated to the sales managers, with the city fathers on individual planets exercising some control over the less privileged classes. Commercial ethics had long been an anachronism. Supply always balanced demand; all production was fully automated and self-servicing, and business functioned by virtue of its machines' efficiency. There was no need for staffs to concern themselves at all, except from habit and a consciousness of being on the payroll. Sales managers fought for markets that were already supplied and serviced in any case. Maintenance men, a relic of the old trade union system, tended machines that were self-servicing and never failed. Accountants supervised vast areas of electronic brain that always balanced its final budget. And now, cruising in a bewilderment of indecision, unemotionally aware that evolution had passed the point of stagnation and was well on its way to one of its periodic cycles of retrogression, was Phrix, the nearest thing to a conscience the universe had found for itself in a brace of millennia. And Shale was all set to kill the conscience of the universe.

"Shale," she asked, calling to her aid every ounce of the A Factor the machines had once assured her that she had, "aren't you setting your sights too low?"

His mouth was still drawn back in an ugly loop due as

much to his own thoughts as to the gravitational forces acting on him. Conversation was difficult, but possible.

"Carve him to pieces," he said. "Cut his lobes off."

"It isn't big enough," she persisted.

"What's bigger?" he wanted to know.

"The Publisher," she said. "You are too big to be just advertisement manager. The Publisher would recognize that if you told him."

"The Publisher's on Asgard," he said. "Phrix is on Lemos. I can get Phrix. Can't get to the Publisher. Can't go to Asgard."

"Why not?" she asked.

He was so overcome with the enormity of the suggestion that he reached up with difficulty and set in motion the slowing down process before they had even reached the light barrier. The question itself was an affront to custom and an affront to custom was the rank, lewd taste of indecency on the taste buds of human rectitude.

"No one goes to Asgard!" he said.

"You are not just anyone," she protested. "You are Shale. Nothing is too big for you. The menials follow custom blindly. A real archexecutive makes his own."

He savored the fine sentiment of the compliment, considered and digested it. He found it much to his liking. He was not the first to take the image of his greatness from the looking-glass world of a woman's eyes. But century-old inhibitions are hard to counter even face-to-face with mirrored greatness.

"No one goes to Asgard," he repeated, with somewhat less conviction than before.

"Is it guarded?" she asked.

"No. I don't think so. It's just a question of what a man does and doesn't do. You've done a lot of tweeting about badness. Well, that's bad. Doing what one doesn't do."

"You're the biggest barstard in the universe," she quoted him a little primly. Suddenly, he laughed.

"It's right," he said. "So I am."

He managed to turn slightly on his side. The restraining forces had diminished to 2G (Shorne).

"What a brain you've got!" He grinned. "Why shouldn't I go to Asgard? Why shouldn't I kill the Publisher instead of Phrix and take over the whole empire?"

"I didn't mean that!" she protested.

"I did," he said. "Baby—we're going to Asgard!"

"Do you know the way?" She hoped, now that she had prodded his ambition and seen it go bounding over new and unintended horizons, that he did not.

"It's not difficult," he said. "No craft is programmed for Asgard, but its sun stands out well enough. We can go on automatic to the outer periphery and manual from there. Once you're out of the galaxy there's only Asgard before you come to the next and that's a lifetime's journey."

"Then we're going?"

"You bet we are," he said. "It's not much further than Lemos. We'll head first for Zanto. That's the last planet programmed in the galaxy, on the very edge of the periphery. We should be there in about five months. Another five and we should be orbiting Asgard."

"We shall be together for ten months, Shale!"

"You won't know about it," he said. "Even a third-rate, standard, production-line model like this crate of Kantor's is wired for sensivation. How else would you pass the time, jog-trotting across the universe? You could put yourself in coma, of course, but what a waste of time! And time's a thing none of us have got enough of to waste. A few hundred years and where are you? Sensivation for the first five months and a few good long sessions after that, once we're on course."

She covered her disappointment as best she could and, as the ship leveled out at an even speed, Shale uncoupled the wires and navel suction pads from the little black box. They extended simply in long spirals to the bunks.

"Bed down," he ordered, "and bare your navell!"

"I don't know that I want to," she protested.

He snapped open the buckle to her belt, opened her smock and clamped the cup in place.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Sex, sadism, romance, adventure, violence or a happy manipulation of symbols as they come?"

"I'll take the symbols," she whispered.

"Quite right," he approved. "I always do that. Of course, to me, symbols are sex-symbols in any case, but it's more fun to watch and wait for it without knowing what's coming."

"It must be," she said, sighing.

She hesitated for a moment as Shale busied himself with the dials that, in any case, adjusted themselves correctly after the initial choice indicator had been set. There was something she wanted to say that was very important to her now that her symbols were about to be manipulated. She needed very much the help of her A Factor.

"Shale," she asked, diffidently, at last, "do you like me?"

"Of course," he said, easily, the dials now set and his finger hovering over the button for the course to Zanto.

"Could you love me, do you think?"

"Love?" he asked. "What is happening inside that tiny brain of yours? What's love? You don't seem to know the meaning of the word. You love a good beano, an orgy, sex, women in general, a fight if you're winning it. You don't love a person."

"No," she sighed, "I suppose you don't."

"Right," he said, pressing the button and taking a phial from the dispensary cabinet. "We're all plugged in to Free Symbols and course is on Zanto. All you have to do now is swallow the coma tablet and wake up when we get there."

"I suppose," she said, "if you like a person, you could love him—or her—too?"

"Are you going to swallow your pill and get to sleep?" he asked. "Or am I going to bring the ship around and find you've suffocated when I wake up? We ought to be well away before the auto-pilot brings her around on course. That can be quite a strain if you're awake. You shouldn't change destination in flight."

"I wondered," she said. "I was talking to that woman in the"—she hid her face for a moment and the hair roots on her chin tingled—"in the brothel. She told me some things I didn't know before."

"I'll bet she did." He grinned.

"Shale," she asked.

"What is it?"

"Do you ever feel you want something outlandish and bizarre?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he grumbled. "Get outside that capsule before I ram it down your throat."

"Yes, Shale," she sighed and slept. The sequence of the symbols that crowded in on her induced dreaming and provided for her a life, synthetic, but nevertheless her own, and thus every bit as important as any other life, remained forever her secret. There were none even interested enough to guess at what they might have been, still less their origins or the Freudian means of their projection. But, as they lay together on adjacent bunks and Shale's lips slowly drew back across his white teeth in a wolfish, Dracula-like grin, Marilyn's coarse, wrinkled, downy features relaxed into a soft smile and the corners of her long, lipless, ape-like mouth turned up and the lips parted. They made no sound but they were shaped into the beginnings of a sibilant. "Sh" for Shale.

The ship swung slowly around and headed for Zanto and the outer periphery. It began to accelerate sharply. Soon, it was shuddering through the light barrier and rushing forward in conformity with good Newtonian principles to reach

its final leveling-off speed. Under pressure that would have crushed anyone in the waking state, with the buffers under their couches depressed to their fullest extent, Shale and Marilyn slept. Marilyn, it was safe to assume, dreamed of Shale and Shale, in five months, would have time to dream of half the women in the universe. Their eyes would seem to open at the end of it all, with a sense of the passage of time suspended. They would be conscious only of having slept and dreamed a night's long dream. No one is bored in space travel, not even on the occasional intergalactic journeys. The bodily functions are inhibited and even without the normal antigeriatric injection, the body ages at about the speed of a diamond in a vacuum.

X

LIMSOLA WAS playing chess with Hamrod, the Chemist's P.A. The two computer lenses scanned the board, concerned with a hundred thousand alternatives and probabilities. Hamrod depressed his button and a black pawn moved. Limsola's computer countered with the queen. It seemed at first that the incredible had happened. A circuit failure. The queen was obviously in jeopardy; even Hamrod could see that. He bit the fingers of both hands at once and rocked himself with excitement. No one had won a game of chess in centuries. The computers invariably played to a stalemate.

"Take the queen!" he whispered. "Take the queen!"

He pressed his button with a trembling, nail-nibbled finger. It was not to be. The scanning eye swayed to and fro above the board almost as if the vast brain in miniature were shaking its head. No bigger than a matchbox, it had seen through its opponent's ruse. It ignored the queen and countered with an ingenious trap of its own. It would have needed twenty-four standard moves and counter moves before the object of its strategy became apparent, but Limsola's player was at once aware of its opponent's intention, avoided the obvious, and retreated. Machine play is always god-on-high above its operator's head.

"I don't know why we bother," Hamrod grumbled fretfully.

"Darts?" she asked brightly. He sighed.

"I remember, years ago," he said, "when three in a bed used to win. With three in the double-top every time you want it, we had to scrap that rule. First away wins every time. Sometimes I think our machines are too good."

"You can go first," she promised.

"No." He yawned. "I'm tired. Far too tired for darts. Let's

have another injection and go to bed. I shouldn't be surprised if one day we find these damned machines go on playing after we've left them. There's no reason why they shouldn't press their own buttons if they wanted to."

"None at all," she agreed. "All the industrial one's do."

"There's only one thing," he grumbled, "that we haven't mechanized, even if it is mostly chemistry now. Slip your things off, there's a good girl."

"I'm engaged then?" she asked.

"Of course you are," he snapped. "Now old Mule's dead and out of the way, I'm not letting you go to one of the others; you're far too good for them. What did they do with Mule, by the way?"

"No one seemed to bother," she told him. "I didn't want to leave him just lying there by the lagoon. He was quite a nice old boy. I had him dissolved and poured him into the water. I thought he would have liked that. He turned a shade of dark blue."

"We're none of us getting any younger," Hamrod said gloomily. "I suppose we've all got to go some time. I don't think that I want immortality anyway. Things just go on and on and you don't notice anymore. Of course, it's different now I've got you. How old are you, by the way?"

"I was only imported a few years ago," she confessed. "I'm genuinely young. I'm thirty."

"Wonderful," he breathed. "I didn't think there was a girl on Asgard under a hundred and fifty. The supply seemed to dry up some years ago. I think no one bothered to order any more. Mule must have been more enterprising than I was. You're a Salumi, I suppose?"

"I certainly am not!" she told him indignantly. "I come from a very old Ruling Race family of professional mistresses. We inject Salumi genes for our looks, but a good mistress needs conversation and intelligence as well. Salumis are only bed-mates."

"You're intelligent too?" he asked, surprised. "It must be very dull for you. None of the higher executives have an I.Q. above a hundred or they wouldn't be higher executives. What do you do with your intelligence in your spare time?"

"I find my way around," she said. "I've achieved Asgard and the P.A.'s while I'm still really young. Hardly anyone has done that before."

"And now that you're here," he asked, "what now?"

She left the board with the king in check and walked to the window looking out over a rose garden where an auto-gardner was busy pruning. The long hill sloped down in a

profusion of flowers and colors to the chain of blue lagoons stretching away into the misty distances. It was Asgard as she had pictured it in the fantasies of childhood, but it was not all of Asgard.

"Where is the Valley of the Presidents?" she asked.

Taking advantage of her digression, he poked a bishop forward with a nervous finger. Her player let out a warning hoot and replaced the piece in its proper square. *Phit! Phit! Phit!* it hooted.

"Cheat!" she said.

"The Valley of the Presidents?" he asked awkwardly. "What ever put that in your head? We don't talk about the valley, you know."

"Why not?" she asked.

"It's one of the things one doesn't mention. No one ever bothers the Presidents."

"I don't want to bother them," she said. "I just want to know where they are."

She slipped her long, cool fingers around his neck. It was the neck of a young man, but the skin was dry and parched and the muscles were hard, like perished rubber. The neck of an old man that had kept its shape and poise and outward semblance of youth but had lost the suppleness that even the best of hormones could not preserve forever. His glands, however, responded to her touch and the adrenal-sympathico habit. He was happy when her fingers played across his chest and in the dead cave behind the solar plexus a moth-like youth flickered for a moment around the ghost of a tired flame. He was incapable of generating any desire himself but there was some sort of satisfaction in placating a manipulated urge in the second-hand relationship of mind to body.

"Slip off your things," he said. "I want to feel the touch of real youth against me."

"Where is the Valley of the Presidents?" she asked, wheedling his dry, but still active nerve ends with expert fingertips.

"Beyond the mountains," he groaned. "At the end of the last lagoon. You never see the mountains from here because of the mist. But no one ever crosses the mountains. It wouldn't be right. Not right at all."

On the bed that rocked gently on its underslinging, her lips traveled, gently breathing over the leathery, fibrous texture of his skin, and for the first time in years his limbs began to twitch and the muscles of his legs tightened, bracing against the rigidity of a stone-hard patella. He groaned a little and his agony was only partly arthritic. When she left

him. he was quite dead, but his passing had been happy and in the way he would have wished.

Limsola stroked the wispy, auburn hair back from the smooth forehead and kissed him gently on the dry lips before she covered him with the sheet. Hamrod was a still, frail, ancient, mummified sack of organs with no defect but their will to function any longer or draw in one more lungful of the flower-scented air of Asgard. Limsola was still young enough to feel unrewarding sentiments like sympathy and sorrow. She had the inbred intelligence of a long line of mistresses and lived more fully because she could still feel a sadness for insignificance and the petering out in Hamrod of five centuries of utter unimportance.

It seemed unnecessary to arrange for Hamrod to be dissolved. He was old enough to be practically insoluble. It would be some time, if ever, before anyone noticed his absence from the Club, and the Universal Chemical Works would function just as well without him. These days, the P.A.'s rarely used the Club at all, preferring seclusion with their mistresses and taking all deliveries through the supply tubes from the import bases. Sometimes they would cruise to the nearest lagoon and drift for a while. Occasionally there was some not very effective contact with the sales managers in the galaxies, but generally, at the great age they had all attained, they wanted a quiet life away from the universe, away even from Asgard, secure in the bosom of anyone understanding or well-paid enough to comfort them.

Limsola brought the jet-car out from the garage at the top of the incline leading from the white house down through the gardens on the southern slopes of the hill to the lagoon below. With the wind blowing her long, flaxen, Salumi hair, she cruised down to the water and along the shore in the direction of the misty cloud bank that should hide the mountains at the end of the long chain of lagoons. The barrier before the Valley of the Presidents.

The water was as still and placid as ever, rippling only where a fish threshed its way on translucent flippers, singing throatily or hooting. There was no one drifting on the lagoon nor lying on its banks and the great houses of the P.A.'s on the low hills beyond were silent and apparently deserted. A few brightly colored birds glided, whistling across her path, and a sparrow-eater flicked a long hungry trunk, narrowly missing the emerald green and white flutter of its prey. Limsola sang a soft, haunting refrain, a folk tune from a far planet that had once been her home. Her voice was barely audible above the hum of the motors, but

the birds and fish fell silent, listening. They had never heard a human voice raised in song before. Music as an expression of joy had died with joy itself after the electronic revolution. The machines had made purer sounds and better sounds, even more musical sounds than the ancient instruments. The computers had composed with a mastery unequalled by any human musician. But when the machines came with their music and their musical scores, no one was any longer inspired to listen. Someone must create from within himself before another can respond, and there was nothing left to be created.

But still Limsola sang. There were corners of the universe where pockets of time had forgotten to catch up with the master clock, ticking away at the heart of the continuum. No instruments, of course. No musical scores. An odd folksong sung, its words meaningless, its sentiments the primitive outpourings of an underdeveloped, forgotten people from somewhere near the beginnings of time, but still finding some chord of response in the heart of an odd Limsola on a fine morning.

As the mist cleared, the mountains loomed ahead. A vast, purple massif, with white snow on the jagged dragon's teeth of its summit, reaching upward to touch the eternal blue sky of Asgard's apparent ending. Behind the mountains would be the valley. The Valley of the Chemist, the Publisher, the Toymaker, the Couturier, the Builder, even, it was said, of the last of the Wordsmiths, left over from the days of the tale and the writings that no one read. The valley was the hub of the universe. The only possible goal for a girl like Limsola.

No great difficulty presented itself. Hamrod's jet-car was the best the Universe could offer and the only possible route became self-evident the nearer she approached to the foot of the mountains. There was a pass running from the lagoon along the course of an ancient stream, disappearing now and again into folds of the landscape, to emerge higher up and wind between crests until it reached the summit as a thin white line etched into the distant hazy blue of the heather. There had even, at one time, been a road. It was now a wide, evenly ascending gradient overgrown with vegetation that parted in the jet-stream like water before the bows of a ship. The brightly flowering bushes of the lowlands gave way, in time, to broom and thorn and then up through mountain ash, highberry bushes and wildglocken and out on to the multicolored heather, the foraging ground of the grasshopper-like, wingless bees of Asgard. Limsola's jet soared over all obstacles without difficulty and soon the heather

thinned out and there was no further vegetation. A smooth, rocky road, carved out of the mountain, followed the course of the ancient stream that apparently dated from the days when road surfaces had been important, before the discovery of the anti-matter engine and the auron stream. Limsola wondered vaguely how anyone had reached Asgard before the auronic revolution, but concluded that there had been people, indigenous or colonizers, before the presidents and their assistants arrived and found it more desirable than any other planet in the galaxies. Whoever the original people had been, they would not have survived long under the dominance of the industrial heads of the Ruling Races.

There were golden-white clouds resting on the summit of the mountains, but a warm upward current of air caused them to part, curling and billowing at either side of the pass. It was in fact this curling of the mist that led Limsola on the right course over the summit, since the road itself, after winding out of the heather, was soon lost under the snow. She sailed on through the cleavage in the mist and soon she was at the top. Below her was the Valley of the Presidents. It was a vast panorama of river, hill and forest, with a dot of white here and there among the trees—the houses of the great men themselves. The downward course of the road was now plainly marked with giant pillars set at quarter-mile intervals, each surmounted by a scarlet eagle. There were no guards, nor any sign of armies. The only barrier between the valley and the outside world was the ancient taboo. One does not do what is not done. In the end it is always a woman who challenges the immutability of any taboo. Limsola felt no reproach in the stares of the scarlet eagles. She continued to sing softly to herself as she scudded down over the snow. She had reached the hub of the whole universe.

XI

IT WAS fortunate for Shale that the metabolic rate in hybrids is considerably more rapid than in true humans. When Marylin awoke from her coma, they were already in orbit around a planet and slowing rapidly to land. Shale was still sleeping deeply and no amount of pummeling would wake him. It was at times like these that the significance of a good A Factor in the I.Q. ratings assumed paramount importance. Bewildered and excited as she was, and inexperienced in the operation of spacecraft or in the workings of the minds that had once commissioned, built and stocked them, her in-born intelligence applied itself logically to the problem con-

fronting her. While still slapping Shale's face and sobbing in a frenzy of desperation at her own ignorance and inadequacy, a still, small voice spoke somewhere in the impermutable regions of her hybrid psyche. "Where there is dope there is antidote," it said. Even her subconscious had begun to express itself in the current slogans. She was puzzled at first at the import as well as at the origin of the voice. But then, in a sudden flash, she understood. The dispensary. Stocked by automatic handlers at the ports of call, the medicines were arranged in standard, easy-to-recognize form for the benefit of the uninitiated. In the year of grace A.E. 30,968, no one was initiated to any noticeable degree.

The bottles were labeled, "Short sleep—one tablet for each hour. Swallow immediately before depressing control," "Long sleep. Comas up to five years—see instructions on blue bottles for duration," "Comas up to five hundred years—see red bottles on lower shelf." There was a rack of blue bottles labeled, "Large tablet—five month coma. Take one small tablet for each additional week required." Above the profusion of bottles, the Publisher's point-of-sale display panel flashed its message:

COMAS FOR ROAMERS
DAGWOOD'S DEEP SLEEP SINKS YOU DEEPER

Each rack contained a second row of yellow bottles all bearing the single word "antidote." They were aerosol containers emitting a fine spray for inhalation, since the sleeper was naturally unable to swallow a tablet. Marylin brought the bottle to Shale with difficulty, due to the rapid deceleration of the ship, and pressed the ejector nozzle. Shale awoke almost immediately, considerably refreshed after his five month sleep.

"We're there!" Marylin told him. "We're orbiting Zantol!"

Shale threw off his sleeping harness and rose almost to the roof before he had time to grasp one of the anchoring straps on the cabin floor. He steered himself to a porthole and looked down on the planet below. What he saw there was no sight for a man newly awakened from a peaceful slumber.

"That's not Zantol!" he shouted. "That's a penal planet. Someone's been tampering with the controls."

"How could they?" Marylin asked.

"Remote control," he snapped. "There are ways of doing it if you're sure the pilot's asleep. I've grounded competitors myself on uninhabited planets in the days when I had competitors."

He pulled himself to his bunk and threw the main switch from auto to manual, cutting off any possibility of further outside control.

"Get back on your couch," he ordered. "We're going up!"

"What is a penal planet?" she asked.

With the situation now under control and the ship responding to his will and fancy, he was in the mood to humor her curiosity.

"Want to see?"

Marylin nodded and he brought the ship down through the atmosphere to where the surface now showed clearly on the large scanner screen above the bunks.

"You see," he pointed out. "The first thing I noticed, even at a glance through the porthole. No vegetation. There's something in the air, an acid most likely. It can't support life in any form. The convicts wear helmets and suits and they're fed liquids through a tube from a thing they call an alimentary reservoir. There they are! You can see them now on the side of the mountain, hewing at the rock. That's what they do all day. Move the mountains, a piece at a time, down into the valleys, with only hand tools to do it with. There's the flagellator—the machine that keeps them at it. If they stop, it flogs them. It's got a wallop you can feel even through a space suit. There's the alimentary reservoir coming up now on stilts that look like spiders' legs. They're plugging the tubes into their suits and they must be pretty hungry, the way they're all milling around to get to it. They don't even notice the flagellator getting them in line. . . . It's a good thing you woke me up in time."

"How long a sentence do they get?" she asked, "and what are they there for?"

"Industrial crimes mostly," he told her. "Sales managers encroaching on another's preserves. Representatives poaching on someone else's territory. Some of them, I expect, got in the way of someone else's promotion. As for how long—they're there for life, but none of them are likely to live long, so it's always a fairly short sentence. There's no way off a penal planet."

"How awful!" she exclaimed.

"The machines—the warders—get you out with one of their space suits and then blow your ship up. It's part of the drill. No one lands there except by mistake. You drop the convicts by parachute in the assembly area."

"Couldn't you help them?" she asked.

"Help them?" He was genuinely shocked. "Of course not. They're criminals. I couldn't interfere with law and order."

"It might have been us," she said. "It nearly was!"

"I don't know what 'might have been' has to do with anything," he grumbled. "They're down there and we're up here. That's all there is to it. I couldn't do anything even if I wanted to."

"But Shale," she begged, "one of them might have been you. You said they were there for industrial crimes. You must have done something like that yourself sometime."

"Of course I have," he said with a sigh. "But I won. It's only a crime if it doesn't come off. Every rung in the ladder to fame is a piece of someone else's ambition. They're the criminals—the ones that got walked on—not the chap who got to the top. That's what life's all about, isn't it?"

"I wish you would try and take at least one of them off," she sighed.

"My dear girl, I can't!" he said.

"No," she sighed, thoughtfully. "You can't. Only the Publisher can really alter anything. I'm glad we're going to Asgard."

"This is Phrix's doing," he decided. "Something on my own craft recorded that we were following him and that we had turned off in the direction of Asgard. He fed all the data into a probability computer and it reported that we were the most probable people on board. So he knew I was still alive. Perhaps he worked it out for himself. His mind's a sort of probability computer, anyway. It must be Phrix. He was the only one near enough in space to reach our direction setting by remote control. I wish this ship was geared for it and I could reach him now. I'd land him in the Gromwold volcano. But I couldn't anyway. Part of Phrix is always awake."

"Are we far off course?" she asked.

"Not far, fortunately. All the penal planets are in the outer periphery. I don't know which one this is, but it won't matter. It's already been recorded in the flight control. I need only reset for Zanto."

They strapped themselves down again on the couches and swallowed an hour's sedation. When they awoke there were no stars ahead of them, but only the faint glow of distant galaxies. That and one single, blue luminous pinpoint of light, less than ten light-years distant. Their destination—the sun of Asgard.

XII

PHRIX, WHO WAS incapable of sorrow as an emotion, was nevertheless able to experience a kind of intellectual regret. He was again at the three-way meeting point of his triple

mind. Alone in Shale's spacecraft, already in orbit around Lemos, he allowed his thought trains to dwell on a problem that in its basic elements was as old as the inhabited universe itself: how far it is justifiable to manipulate evil and turn it against itself. Will two wrongs cancel each other out and leave a right, or will they result only in a negation? If one is hounded by an exponent of unethical practices and one defeats him by a further unethical practice, is this poetic justice, or no justice at all? Can it, in any case, be the result of logical calculation? A true Groil can operate only in conformity with his own and universal logic. The switching of Shale's spacecraft to a penal planet was justifiable, expedient, but was it in any true sense logical? The penal planets were one of the evils he had set himself out to eliminate. Where, then, should Shale be? Immobilized. What could immobilize Shale better than a penal planet? Nothing. He conjured up an eidetic image of Shale in a heavy space suit hewing at the rocky surface of a dead planet. The vision gave him little pleasure.

Criminals need not be deterred, he thought. They can be treated chemically or lobes cut off. Dates from days when leniency was seen to fail. Universe went back to deterrent. Now—small injection—make any man anything.

Phrix was welcomed with genuine delight by the editors on Lemos. The planet was already humming with rumors of a new approach to publishing: papers that carried news items independent of advertisements; copy designed to induce a scanner to read further than a headline—and, having read, to be influenced in his opinions by those of the Publisher. It was heady stuff. What opinions did the Publisher have? What opinion did anyone have, if it came to that? No one quite knew, but opinions could be generated in any direction and in any field. The whole staff was agog with receptivity and prepared to channel every ounce of opinion-molding material along any path a guiding mind might direct. Phrix needed only to explain his idea and everyone would subscribe to it. It was true that machines composed all the copy, but that was not an insuperable obstacle. Machines could be programmed. They would express any opinion forcefully, or with tact or by innuendo, exactly as they were instructed to do. Editors had always been much the same.

The whole publishing empire was pregnant with resolve. Its great womb was widening and something was hovering somewhere on the very brink of conception. Unfortunately, no one quite knew what it was. Only Phrix. And Phrix saw

the universe and all its frailties as if outlined in soft pencil on a drawing board. Given an eraser, he could have wiped out the whole cosmos and redrawn it with an eye to perfection. But somehow the nature of the eraser itself eluded him. Was it violence, subterfuge, evil against evil, destruction of machines and a return to handicrafts? Was it a physical or a mental thing? Both probably. Did the mental precede the physical or vice versa? Think and act or act and then think? The more he considered his drawing board view of the universe, the more his thoughts turned to Far-Groil.

Would he not be justified in limiting the problem to the few remaining members of his own race and a distant planet called New America in orbit around Barnard's Star? It should be easy to produce copy with no more far-reaching object than the evacuation by the Ruling Races of Far-Groil. A rumor of a new virus or a weakness in the planet's crust would achieve that object in a matter of months. And then the Groils could return, look again for the lost arts, and live together in the contemplative, happy anarchy of thirty millennia ago.

Why not? The Ruling Races could then have the universe to themselves. Cut each other's throat, send each other to penal planets, carouse and debauch themselves in an eternal cosmic orgy. Why should he, Phrix, a Groil, concern himself with the universe? A man who watches a crocus flower and wonders and thinks is more use to evolution than a host of conquerors. Or is he? If conquerors bring peace, as they sometimes do, the crocus may flower untrodden by marching feet. But if there were no conquerors, there would be no conquered and no need for armies in the first place to set their great feet on the real miracles pushing their petals shyly and unnoticed between the blades of grass.

"Tool of Destiny," the central intellect insisted.

"Far-Groil," the left-hand lobal area whispered nostalgically.

In the vast, sprawling, towering edifice of concrete and glass known for obscure reasons as the Fleet, the editors gathered. They gathered every day in the Fleet, watching the machines ticking, composing, proofing and printing, bundling, packing and loading the transporters. But this time it was different. Without a single memo from the mustering Role Taker they all made their way to the conference room and took the places indicated by the chief cybernetic chairman, a machine known as the Beaver. They sat with their recording notebooks on the table before them and waited. A dispensing trolley brought coffee and chew-gum. Not a

single man or woman accepted the hallucinogen; for once they preferred to remain in the waking world, a world that was about to offer them what a dream image never did, the opportunity in some way to control it. The opportunity was somewhere without. They sat and watched for it to knock. The door opened and Phrix came in.

He took his place, as the machine indicated, at the head of the long table. The junior editors looked down from the screens of a thousand view panels ranged around the walls, their faces unmoving and their mouths parted over their notebooks, hanging from leather straps around their necks. The News Assimilator trundled to his side and extended its microphone on a long flexible neck, the circuits of its analytical brain ready to digest, abstract, evaluate and finally disseminate. Phrix looked straight ahead, his eyes far away, seeing no one, but conscious of every thought.

"I am a Groil," he said.

"Yes," they chorused.

"Groils are the best of servants," he continued, speaking by rote the ingrained philosophy of his central brain. "A servant without a master can never change the course of great events."

"You are the master," they told him.

"No," he said. "Machines are master."

The long neck of the News Assimilator arched and straightened again in what, for the want of a better word, could only be described as a shrug. Its scanner pivoted to take in the length of the table as if probing the editors for possible reaction and then returned again to hover dutifully by Phrix.

"We are the editors," they said. "We control the machines. Machines do not think."

"Do you?" he asked.

"We are here," they pointed out. "We are here to think whatever you tell us to think. Machines cannot do that. Machines are programmed. Tell us what we have to do."

"I am a Groil," he said. "I cannot be the master. The master, everyone's master, is the Publisher. The Publisher must decide and I shall follow."

The News Assimilator retracted its microphones and switched itself into a state of quiescent awareness. The editors doodled various nonsense rhymes into their respective recorders. The juniors on the screens yawned. Destiny had crept in on the paws of a mouse, amplified in the hollow echo of the mind, for a moment, into the sound of clattering hooves.

"You will send a signal to the Publisher?" someone asked.

"I shall go to Asgard," Phrix announced.

The chamber came to life again. The News Assimilator reactivated itself and flashed a warning "Top-priority" red light. The editors recorded their first note in five hundred years: "Asgard" they noted in unison. Slowly, the excitement subsided and they turned their heads as one in his direction. Their faces registered a dawning comprehension. They had been fooled by a Groil. Only the News Assimilator continued to flash a warning light in total exaggeration of the situation's newsworthiness.

"No one goes to Asgard!" the editors told each other glumly.

"Nevertheless," Phrix announced to a shocked, uncomprehending chamber, "that is where I am going."

He rose and left the meeting. It was his first great decision. He had never in his life made such a decision before and he felt much better for it.

The door had scarcely closed behind him before the automatic copy-writers were clicking the major news item of his departure into the texts of the better advertisements for setting in every paper distributed by the publishing empire. To human eyes, it hardly seemed that the announcement, breathtaking as it was, warranted the urgency of its dissemination, but the machines, of course, knew best.

"Ortons Auto-programmers ensure smooth control. Avoid manual interference. Phrix's fingers spell disaster."

"Good pilots brake with Rogers Retro-motors—Phrix breaks moral standards of tradition. Don't go to Asgard—go to Rogers."

"Machines are best. No return to manual programs. Let sleeping logs die."

The chief editors and junior editors, the lead writers, cub reporters and copy-writers watched as the automatic proof-readers checked the sheets. They were vaguely troubled by the outcry from their servants. Machine protest focused attention on machine control. A dim awareness of human fallibility grew among editors who had never edited, among reporters who had nothing to report, and copy-writers whose moving fingers had neither writ nor were ever likely to move on.

"It will need new programming," someone murmured, his eyes on the Orton ad.

"The programmers are automatic," someone else pointed out, uneasily.

"The programmers that program the machines that make the programmers are automatic too."

"And the machines that program the programmers of the machines that . . ."

"Somewhere there must be a man!"

"The Publisher!"

"The Publisher!" they all chorused, vastly relieved, although no one really believed in the Publisher either. Asgard was a long way off and the papers were pouring from the presses on to the distribution conveyors. Spacecraft, loaded to capacity, were leaving at regular intervals. Fortunately, the machines were limited by the very conservatism of their own motivation. They could operate only along predetermined channels. Hardly anyone in the universe would realize the implications of Phrix's visit to the Publisher and the bulk of the circulation would be jettisoned in deep space in the usual way. The programming of the Auto-Audit Bureau of Circulation was concerned, as ever, only with statistics.

No one but a Groil could, however, unravel the vast complex of machine production and trace its motivation to its original man-designed source. And only from its source could the reprogramming, that would eventually reorientate the machine copy-writers, begin.

Fortunately, Phrix could inhibit the need for sleep and, as his craft accelerated, he sat stoically at its manual controls with the sun of Asgard glowing, a bright blue blot on his screen. Destination: the Publisher. As he watched the apparent mass of the star slowly increase, he was conscious of humanity at the isthmus of evolution; the flow of its past behind it, the waters welling at the delta, where one fork only would spill into eternity and the others silt up in a waste of mammoth and dinosaur bones. The Publisher would be there, floating on an impervious copy of the *Lemos Galactic Monitor*. Pointing the way.

Thank God for the Publisher, he thought. *Or thank the Publisher for God.*

XIII

THERE WAS NO RAIN on Asgard, only a light snow drifting very occasionally down on to the summits of its mountains. The water from its seas and lagoons was absorbed by the porous rock of their basins and banks, sank down into the earth and was forced up again by internal pressures to spout in fountains from the hilltops, filtered by sands and fortified by minerals. It ran down again to the seas and the porous rock soaked it up again and spread its moisture to feed the roots of all the flora of Asgard.

Marylin's first impression of the landscape was a kaleidoscopic variation of subdued colors. Every bush and tree was a permutation of the shade of its neighbors and no two blossoms were identical. In the light of other suns, the flowers might have seemed brightly colored and garish, but the blue, hazy glow of Asgard's parent permeated the spectrum and leveled all extremes to a liquid, pastel, tranquil homogeneity.

There were low hills, lagoons, rivers, a ridge of mountains and a deep, lush valley, lying well below sea level and thus more extensively watered by the porosity of its bedrock. Then came more mountains, plain and hill and tundra, lagoon again, and finally sea. At a river mouth, there was an airport and administrative buildings, but no towns anywhere. Along the lagoon chain, a few white houses blinked a flash of blue sunlight from their windows and in the deep valley an occasional roof of some vast palace showed pale green, among the darker shades of the trees.

"Puzzle to find the Publisher," Shale yawned, heavy from a recent three weeks' sleep. "He's somewhere down there, but we don't want to tangle with anyone else. There may be guards."

"The machines always spoke of a valley," she said. "The Valley of the Presidents."

"Did they now?" He whistled.

He brought the ship down cautiously within range of any guns Asgard might have and circled the airport. No one hailed them with either a challenge or landing instructions and no guns fired.

"No sign of life," he said.

"Those buildings"—she pointed to where the white foam of the emptying river troubled for a short distance the unending calm of the waveless sea—"they control the airport. It's an automatic station; they are all shaped like that. An array of pipes from a funnel structure on the landing ground, a large square central building for sorting and storage, and then a funnel in reverse curving down into the ground. It's a supply base for piped commodities."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"The machines described everything very exactly."

He brought the craft down and hovered over the landing strip. A broad arrow flashed, indicating a landing bay at the mouth of the funnel, and transporter vehicles emerged.

"Don't land," she warned him. "If it's fully auto, we shall be shipped inside and sorted. The machines can't differentiate. We might come under the general programming of livestock."

"It's a thought," he agreed. "It's very much a thought. It would account for the absence of a challenge and no one shooting at us. I don't suppose anyone has come to Asgard for years, except perhaps mistresses. I wonder how they sort and pipe *them* to the Presidents."

"Direct to the palaces," I expect," she answered. "All the houses along the lagoons had landing strips."

"The question is," he considered, "which one is the Publisher?"

"Try the valley," she advised. "The deep valley over the mountains."

Marylin is an asset, he thought. *Every bit as good as Phrix*. He needed someone who could do his thinking for him. It was not an archexecutive's function to know things. An archexecutive was a selector of conflicting advices. Why know, when you could employ knowledge? Marylin, he decided, was as good as on the payroll. Assistant Advertisement Manager. And Phrix was as good as dead. He brought the ship around and headed for the valley.

Cruising over the lagoons, he was conscious of a complete reversal of his normal mental outlook and a cold twitching like a fish in his bowels. It was fear. He was overawed at the thought of meeting the Publisher physically, face to face. The primitive people of long ago must have felt something similar, standing alone before the altar in some empty, silent temple, waiting for their god to come down and speak to them and say, "Archexecutive, here am I!" Cub reporters feel much the same at their first orgy. No idea what to say and, more important still, no idea whom to say it to. How did one behave in the presence of the really great? Did one burst in, armed, and say "Hark, ye?" Or would the presence be seen only on an intercom, surrounded by bodyguards and aides? The primitive people of long ago had probably fallen on their knees or on their faces and, oddly enough, he felt disposed to do the same thing. But the right ethic was lacking, or the knowledge of what the right ethic was. Ethic was always custom and what he was about to do was not customary.

"There it is!" She pointed. "The valley!"

The valley was below, but there appeared to be no break in the trees. The blue and white and purple heather of the mountains merged into gold and red and brown scrub. The scrub was interspersed with short, flowering trees, becoming taller as the valley sloped down, until, at its base, there were only giant, multicolored oaks, beeches and elms hiding the contours of the ground beneath them. A river threaded its way somewhere among the trees, evidenced here and there

by a bright flash of reflected sunlight. The occasional pale green dots they had first identified as palaces were hidden by their present angle of approach.

"There's a road," she said. "Or a track. Leading down from the mountains. You can see it as a line in the mist."

He headed for the mountain crest and followed the course of the road; it was lost every now and again in the scrub but emerged lower down as a break in the even surface of the trees below. A moment later they saw the green roof of a palace in a clearing at the foot of the mountain. A giant staircase led down from its portals to the silver curve of the river and a postage stamp landing area, just large enough for a medium-sized craft of the Kantor category.

Unused to manual controls, Shale made several attempts to maneuver into the correct position for direct descent, but each time tangled with the branches of the surrounding trees. He blew up again and hovered.

"You try," he said. "The machines taught you everything else. They must have touched on ships."

"I couldn't!" she gasped.

"Get weaving!" he ordered.

"Shale," she begged, "only a few days ago in conscious time, I had never been outside my cell. I couldn't pilot a spaceship."

"Someone has to," he said, "and I can't. We're not going back now. Get her down."

He seemed to have lost his usual confidence with the knowledge of the Publisher's proximity below and his hands, she noticed, were shaking. Gingerly, she fingered the knobs and levers, the incessant voices of her teachers sounding in her head. "The ship automatically follows the direction of the joy stick. Draw upward, and it rises, downward and it sinks." She moved the stick experimentally and the treetops on the view-panel moved beneath her. She turned the ship around, took it up and down and finally brought it hovering directly over the landing strip.

"Great!" he shouted. "Down we go!"

She had remembered everything except how to stop and when the voices spoke again in warning, it was already too late. The ship struck the center of the hard stone paving; the extendable undercarriage took the strain, depressed its pistons to their fullest extent and then, elasticity overcoming momentum, rebounded like a rubber ball, turned, and crashed upside-down in the river. The current carried it away.

"Ejector hatch!" Shale shouted. "The one at the base!"

But Marilyn was lying under the control panel with blood

oozing from a gash in her forehead and her hand trapped under the wreckage of her couch.

"Don't let them take me," she whispered. "Don't let them put me back in the cage."

Shale did not stop to think. He behaved exactly as he would always have done without considering that circumstances had changed and his relationship to Marilyn along with them. He snapped the ejector harness around him, pushed the ejector button and sat tight. He was fired through the base hatchway and landed safely in a bed of forget-me-nots on the bank. There he collected his thoughts and wondered. He watched the ship rockēd by the current and occasionally rolling over. The course of the river was beginning to slope more sharply downward on its bed of hard granite. A few rocks held the ship for a while, but it would eventually trundle along with the current downward toward the sound of a waterfall.

"I don't need her," he said out loud. "She's got me here. She'll be dead by now. Why should I care?"

He sat on a rock and shook the water from his ears with a crooked finger. He looked up at the palace. He should really be going up the stone steps. Ask where the Publisher lived. Shoot the guards, if any. Remarkable that no one had challenged him yet. He searched for the comforting feel of his pistol grip, snug in the shoulder holster. The ship had rolled over again and water was running in through the ejector hatch. He visualized Marilyn now hanging by her trapped arm and pleading with hallucinatory guards while the water rose.

What do I need with apes? he asked himself.

Browbeat the Publisher, that was probably the best approach, establish himself as a leader, as ad manager. The Publisher would recognize talent when he saw it. Return to Lemos. Shoot Phrix. And then what? He would need another assistant, another encyclopedia.

I'd better get her out, he thought. *I suppose I do need her.*

It was an excuse, even to himself. He felt relieved when he was in the water, swimming toward the ship. Apart from the inertia of habit, he wanted to save her anyway, for reasons that were too obscure to warrant the effort of analysis. He felt a strange wave of affection for her as he banded her head after dragging her to the bank. She was lucid again and immensely happy with her head cradled in his arms.

"You're a tough old monkey," he said. "That skull's solid wood."

She smiled, looking up at him with deep-set eyes under the jutting bushy brows of her half-human cranium.

"Thank you, Shale," she said.

"It's nothing. My fault. Should never give a woman a gun or a spaceship. Bound to kill someone. Let's get going."

He hauled her to her feet and the trees and the stairs swam around and the ground rose to meet her. He put one hand on his hip and scratched his head with the other.

"You're a liability," he said. "I think you did that on purpose."

He picked her up and turned toward the stairway to the palace.

"Holy Asgard!" he said and put her down again. Something had caught his eye. The balustrade wall was overgrown with scarlet-leaved Asgard ivy but there was an inscription on one of the main pedestals. He pulled the trailing strands aside and brushed away the dust and dead fibrous strands.

"The Publisher," he read.

For the first time, he looked thoughtfully at the palace above him. The angles of the roof that showed on the river side were green with lichen and house-leek, the windows were broken and the great doors were hanging open from crumbling posts of some once-impervious stone.

"It's a ruin," he said. "It's a decaying, tumble-down ruin. It's as old as the mountains. Look at the steps! Who would build steps like that these days without an escalator?—and they're crumbling too. How did he get up from the landing strip? He must have walked!"

"Look!" she cried. "Statues! A long avenue of statues leading up to the doors!"

"What are statues?" he asked. "You mean those things in stone that look like someone or other?"

"Help me!" she said. "Help me up the stairs. It all looks like what was once called art. It's different from the concrete buildings we know."

He carried her up the stairs and her heart sang some of the tunes her teachers had sung as part of their history lessons in the cell at Lulonga. "Who is kind as he is kind and who can win my heart and mind," a voice whispered to a lilt, composed by an ancient, Before Evacuation king, 2,500 B.E., or thereabouts.

He set her down at the top of the stairs and she leaned on his shoulder as they walked along the avenue of broken statues to the crumbling doors. They flattened themselves against one of the posts and Shale drew his pistol.

"Stand back!" he shouted, his head turned sideways facing the entrance. "It's Shale and I'm coming in!"

His voice echoed in the great stone hall where the sunlight, flickering from the movement of the trees, streamed in angled spotlight beams through the broken holes in the grimed windows. The hall was an expanse of light and shadow, crumbling, mildewed walls, fluttering, tattered draperies, and huge paintings of vaguely discernible subjects.

"Publisher!" he shouted, "it's Shale!"

A flight of bats swept in a terrified rush of wings from the darkness above the beams and circled, blinded by the light, in the orbit of their own built-in radar control.

"Pictures!" she said.

"Is that what they are?"

"Yes!" she stated, positive. "It's art!"

"What do they advertise?" he wanted to know.

She shook her head; she was not sure whether they had really advertised anything or not. Her teachers had known they were painted but had seemed not to understand exactly why.

Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor and the dust of mildewed matting rose at every step. The bats returned to the seclusion of the high roof and they paused, listening. The only sound was the creak of the doors in the gently moving wind.

The corridor ended with a paneled wall where two further statues in some corrosive-resistant metal guarded a heavy door faced with what appeared to be beaten gold. Pistol poised, Shale pulled it slowly open. It groaned in protest. Beyond the door was a spacious room with windows in all the walls; those ahead looked out on to the trunks of the encroaching trees, those to the right afforded a long vista of the river, the valley descending, and the rising spray of the waterfall. The floor was of some durable wood constructed of solid blocks and there were a number of comfortable, large chairs of a plastic material, still intact. In one of the chairs, Limsola was sitting, cross-legged, and smoking a cigarette in a long, black holder.

"You are Shale," she said. "I heard you announce yourself."

"You," he asked incredulously, "*you* are the Publisher?"

"If I am," she asked, drawing at the cigarette, "shouldn't you be on your knees or something?"

"Are you?" he asked.

She exhaled a cloud of blue smoke and watched it rise, curling, to the high domed ceiling.

"No," she said.

"Where is he?" he asked. "And who are you?"

She rose slowly and smiled at him from under a flickering of long lashes.

"Who I am is not important," she said. "You would be Marylin, of course? We have met. I tuned you in on the view-panel. The Publisher sees everything."

"Where is the Publisher?" Shale demanded.

"I'm sorry about your head," Limsola smiled. "Did he do it?"

"No," Marylin denied emphatically. "It was an accident."

"Hm!" Limsola looked Shale over thoughtfully. "I'm surprised. I wouldn't put anything past him. A very husky male. Ad manager by assassination, I understand?"

"How do you know that?" he asked weakly.

"I'm a girl who knows things," Limsola told him. She smiled and put her arm around Marylin. "We should get to know each other better," she said. "We're the only girls in the Valley of the Presidents. Which means of course, there are no Presidents."

"No Presidents!" Shale asked in amazement.

"Does he always repeat what you say?" Limsola asked Marylin. "Or is he just a slow learner? I don't think he's got it yet."

"But—the Publisher!" Shale asked.

"Come," she said, "we'll try the visual. I'll show you the Publisher."

She led them across the room to a large chair, set apart from the rest and turned to face the windows looking down across the valley. The skeleton bones of two feet lay neatly side by side in front of the chair with the shin bones, tibia and fibula, fallen on either side. There was dust, thigh bones and a rib cage in the chair and a skull fallen sideways with its hollow eyes still looking out at the river. The river that like rivers everywhere seemed symbolically to bear all things away and not to notice it very much.

"The Publisher," she said.

"It's incredible!" Marylin whispered, while Shale, moved by some inner mechanism older than the electronic revolution, subsided slowly on to one knee.

"How old do you think?" Limsola asked. "A thousand years? Two thousand? Or much longer than that? He had a happy life here, I think. Wives or mistresses. There are beds upstairs with a heap of dust in each. A touch of a button would bring him anything he needed down the supply tubes. But his wants became less and less with the passing of the years. His mistresses died, one by one, and he never got around to replacing them. He sat all alone, waiting for

the last great boredom to overtake him. When it came, I would like to think the birds were singing in the garden that was there before the trees marched in."

"He left the universe just ticking over," Marylin said sadly. "With no one to guide its thought, it lost the power to think and when the machines took over, no one noticed. There was so little difference between men and machines in the end."

"What are you babbling about?" Shale asked, getting to his feet, dusting himself mentally and physically. "Machines haven't taken over anything. Who's ad manager? I am. Who controls them? I do."

"If you like to think so," Limsola said. "If you like to think a little further, you are Publisher too—or haven't you the vision for that?"

"What a girl you are!" he exclaimed, quite his old self again. "Of course I am! The whole empire's mine! I'm Publisher. I can do anything I want. And I know what I want right now!"

"Me, I expect," she said.

"You're right every time!" he agreed, putting an arm around her and detaching her from Marylin. "In the morning you can show me how the controls work and where they are and I'll exercise my authority and have Phrix boiled in oil. I'm going to really enjoy myself. But right now, I've had a long flight and I'm overcharged with surplus energy. Show me the bedchambers and the dusty beds."

"Shale—" Marylin began.

"Another time," he said. "Just now, I'm going to be busy."

Limsola paused at the door and looked back at Marylin, who was drooping disconsolately, her head bandaged and her knees unsteady.

"Marylin!" she said.

Marylin raised her aching head and met her smile with haunted, tear-welling eyes.

"I didn't make the rules, Marylin," Limsola said quietly. "It works like this, I'm afraid. But you have one consolation, of course."

"Yes?" Marylin asked.

"You've always wanted to change the rules. I watched you trying on the view panel. You can start today."

"How?" Marylin asked.

"It's all in there." Limsola indicated a steel door at the far end of the room. "You are the Publisher now," she said.

"Come along, girl!" Shale bellowed from somewhere above. "I'm shaking the bones out of the blankets."

"Remember!" Limsola said. "While I take care of Shale—Publish and be damned!"

Someone, Marylin remembered, had said the same thing once before. But in this context, it seemed an enigmatic injunction, if not totally pointless. She had seen only one newspaper in her life and that had been the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* Shale had picked up in Lulonga. She had no idea how newspapers were produced. It was, she had once learned, an automatic process. A commodity was produced in one area to meet the demand in another. There was a link between the producing factory and the Publishing House. The signal passed through a demand-stimulating copy-writer who was linked to a sub-editor with signals from the News Assimilator and the newsad appeared. All the newsads were set on a rotating drum and multi-billion copies of the paper appeared, were bundled, shipped down a conveyor to the delivery craft and ultimately either jettisoned in deep space or carried on auto-transporters to the auto-newsvendors. The function of the human editors, reporters, copy-writers and production personnel was as superfluous as that of Shale himself. No one sold advertising space. It was all sold everywhere already and the demand for it was as constant as the supply. Advertising itself was as illusory as the advertisement manager. It had been built into the system at some time when demands fluctuated and slipped out of step with supply. As long as the two always balanced, it failed even to oil the wheels.

The universe, Marylin thought, had not always been as highly organized and self-sufficient as it was now. A need for everything and everything for a need—the executives the only superfluity, ostentatiously manning the administrative buildings with nothing to administer, hurrying from office to office and floor to floor with papers in their hands, much as they had always done. Flying from planet to planet on urgent missions and charging it up to expenses. It had become a habit. No one faced up to reality. Executives with nothing to execute, administrators with nothing to administer. Renamed and conditioned as consumers, they would at least have given some meaning to the organized complex of production. But they refused to be just consumers with leisure on their hands and no inkling of what to do with it.

The active use of leisure, that was the basic need. She was thinking in slogans again. A new ethic. Something to learn, construct, discover. Given a goal, the rules of the game would evolve. Now, the rule was only the rule of the machine. Habit.

What should the game be? A rediscovery of the arts?

Beginning at the beginning in a world with only the original nucleus of a soul, let the cell divide into a germination of new arts, new philosophies, perhaps even new religions? The old never returned in quite the same form. It might not give meaning to existence but at least it would give the world something to do. It was far from established that existence had any intrinsic meaning in the first place, other than that with which man had endowed it. One gave to the cosmos any meaning one liked. It had no built-in significance of its own.

Who could show to men the jigsaw pieces of the universe again and set them to work piecing it together, each building his own individual picture with himself locked in some integral position between God and the surrounding Outer Darkness? It is the only game that has kept man out of mischief since the beginning of time and now they must play it again or sink back into a jungle more impenetrable than the Jurassic. Who could show them how? Only the Publisher.

Marylin wandered from room to room. Kitchens with a massive collection of delivery and blending tubes. Bathrooms with dry fountains and sunken pools silted with debris. Gymnasias. The tattered, mildewed remnants of a real ancient book library, and then back through the sliding steel door that still opened soundlessly at her approach. The nerve center of the Publishing Empire—the control room. An array of view-panels, a wilderness of knobs and buttons and, most important of all, simple instructions in the mode of operation etched into impermeable tablets above each relevant section.

Phrix, Marylin thought. Phrix will know what to do. Phrix has called himself the tool of destiny. I can call for Phrix and ask his help.

She pressed a button labeled "Locate Ad Manager," and instantaneously the interior of Shale's spacecraft appeared on the screen. She spoke into an obvious microphone that had extended itself on a flexible spiral.

"Publisher to Phrix," she said. "Come in please!"

She had meant to imply that he should come in verbally, but without a sign of acknowledgment, Phrix turned his back on her and walked out of the hatchway of the craft. In a matter of minutes he was standing beside her, calm, imperturbable, attentive. For a moment, she thought the Publisher's equipment had brought him there. Once there had been much talk of teletransportation, but her teachers had assured her it was a myth. Her teachers could never be wrong. Phrix had arrived by tangible means and the expert control of a large ship.

"Publisher?" he said.

He showed no surprise at finding a female hybrid at the hub of the universe, but she realized at once that Groils were incapable of such an emotion. Also, as a Groil, he would judge not her exterior, but her intellect.

"Is the universe a good place, Phrix?" she asked.

"Good?" he returned, as Shale might have done. "What is good? Good is relative. Depends only on standards set. Good is good for one, bad for another. Conformity to standards good for upholders of standard, bad for those who have other standards or no standards at all. Tell me your standard, Publisher, and I will tell you if universe is good or bad."

"By yours, Phrix?"

"I am a Groil. No good or bad. Do not see either. See only what is and what should be. All not what should be."

"What is wrong?"

"Machines. Organism tends to perfect itself. Destiny of organism. Not destiny of machine. Machine builds other machines. Machines program other machines. Programmers program programmers. Do everything better than has been done before. But no new thing. Cannot perfect itself. Organism cannot now program machine. Become less than machine. Wrong."

"Can you put it right, Phrix? Do you know how?"

"Yes."

"Give the organism a goal, give it something to do?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Give it illusion it controls universe. Feeling that it matters. Universe vast but not conscious of itself. Does not know own vastness. Human organism small but conscious of own identity. Must believe, because it knows itself, that it knows the universe too. Must feel more important because capable of feeling importance. Importance illusory word. Nothing has importance but that which can feel important. Must give human organism that. Importance."

"Can you do it through the editors?"

"Yes."

"The machines will be against you."

"No. Machines indifferent. Machines will do as programmed."

"But the programming is done by machines."

"And the programming of the programming."

"Where is the human element? Where did it all begin?"

Phrix walked through the door and out into the long room with the windows looking out to the river. He stood un-

moving by the bones of the Publisher, staring into the distance with eyes that were blank as a mole's. After a while, Marilyn joined him and rather timidly touched his shoulder. Phrix neither turned nor focused the opaque irises of his unseeing eyes.

"Is there a man anywhere, Phrix?" she asked.

"There was," he said.

"Can you change the programming now?"

"Yes," he said. "I must go back to the beginning and start again."

"Where is the beginning?"

"The beginning," he said, "I have always known it. When one has all knowledge stored away, one does not call it up and look at it, until the time comes. All along I have known it and not known. It is my destiny. The beginning is on Far-Groil."

"Of course!"

"When they came from Earth with their machines, they showed them to us. We, the Groils, perfected them. It was we who began the programming and it was we who built machines to build machines. And now it is we, the Groils, who must return and begin all over again. We shall return to Far-Groil."

There was a burst of laughter from one of the rooms above, voices treading the notes of opposing scales, thrust and parry—and suddenly a silence more expressive than the creak of bed-springs.

"Shale?" he said.

"Yes," she sighed. "Shale."

"You are sad," he said. "I know of sadness."

"No." She smiled. "Not sad. I only want Shale to be happy. He has found what he wants. For me, that is enough."

"Small thing," he said. "Small sentiment. But basic thought must underlie all programming. We will instill much small sentiment in the papers."

"Go now!" she said. "Shale will kill you if he comes down now."

He rose, nodded, turned on his heel and walked slowly out through the door without a backward glance. Sadness to Phrix was the knowledge of things that were not as they should have been and happiness the application of the intellect to order. That and the thought of Far-Groil. Phrix was happy. He had never asked how she came to be there in the Publisher's chair. To Phrix, she was the Publisher.

Marilyn watched the ship rise through the trees and disappear. After a while, Shale and Limsola passed the door, their arms linked. Shale, red-faced, disheveled, and in his

heartily way enjoying the power and prestige of a man of Asgard. Limsola, quiet, demure and misty-eyed.

We shall never leave Asgard, Marylin thought.

There had been no friends for Shale to leave behind because all men were enemies to an archexecutive. Only the illusion of power held any significance for him now and he had reached the top. He had no further interest in the universe outside.

"Playing at being a Publisher?" he called to Marylin in passing.

"Yes," Marylin admitted.

"Carry on the good work," he said laughing. "We're going to explore."

Limsola detached herself for a moment and slipped her arm around Marylin's waist.

"Do you mind very much?" she asked.

"No," Marylin said. "I don't mind. I quite like it here."

When they had gone she stroked for a long time the down on her cheek that tingled with the imprint of Limsola's lips. The crinkled hair would never seem quite a symbol of repugnance again. Shale would never kiss her but there was a link between her loneliness and Shale's unconcern. The knowledge that Limsola, whose beauty she admired and wished the ape genes had known how to equal in herself, that Limsola, the beautiful, cared.

Slowly, she returned to the Publisher's panel.

"Publisher to Phrix!" she transmitted.

"Phrix to Publisher!"

"Keep me informed!"

"I will inform you of everything, Publisher!"

Shale and Limsola were swimming in the river and the sun was slipping behind the mountains away from the Valley of the Presidents. Shale did not know it, but the universe would never be quite the same again.

XIV

FOR SOMETIME after the departure of Phrix, the atmosphere on Lemos could only be described as auronic. Pregnant. Pregnant with aurons. Awaiting the birth of something. Births on Lemos follow the same law of averages as elsewhere in the universe. One in every 10^{25} th will be a genius. Every healthy, virile male has the chance of siring—as every fecund, petal-cheeked female has of suckling—genius in the same

ratio as each might have in winning first dividend in the intergalactic sweepstake. They go on suckling and siring and buying tickets just the same. The birth of ideas follows the same pattern. Only one every century or so is in any way different from all the ideas that have gone before. Every century or so, something happens. Something, somewhere, in however small a degree, has changed and nothing will ever be quite the same again. Evolution has opened one eye and taken note. Somewhere a giraffe has added .01 inches to the length of its neck. A virus has stood up on its flippers and spit in the eye of a carefully cultured, marauding antibody. A bent-backed biped has straightened ~~to~~ to look over the long grass of the tundra and bequeathed millennia and trillennia of slipped discs to all the bipeds who follow, reached for the stars and believing, quite erroneously, that evolution favors the braced spine and the upended womb. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

All this and a newsad, too. A newsad without news. Or news without the ad. It was heady stuff. Evolution blinked and sighed. The bipeds had been quiet for centuries. Once they had always been up to something.

Editors, sub-editors, reporters, copy-writers gathered daily in the composing room, watching the news and the ads clicking in and the newsads clicking out. Waiting for something to happen. A breakthrough. A news item without an ad. An ad without a news item. There was much speculation about the form such a phenomenon might take. Would anyone read, even in clipped headline form, a bare statement of fact unconnected with a product? Was not the promotion of a product the only justification for the inclusion of a fact? Conversely, was not the fact the only justification for the mention of the product? Could "Man bites dog" exist as a readable headline without the sponsoring "Dumkins dentures for exciting biting?" Even the advocates of "news for news' sake" had to admit that direct reporting of everyday happenings would be deadly dull even if enlivened by the old method of interviewing anyone within hailing distance and thus presenting the man-in-the-street illusion. Reporters' dicta could usually be expressed in syllogisms with varying degrees of authentic fallacy: *The gibbet was seen by Jones. Jones is a little man. I am a little man. Therefore I saw the gibbet. . . .*

"What did you see, Mr. Jones?"

"I saw him there on the gibbet."

"You saw him there on the gibbet, Mr. Jones. What was he doing there on the gibbet?"

"He was hanging."

"Hanging there on the gibbet?"

"Yes."

"And what did you say when you saw him hanging there on the gibbet?"

"Say?"

"Yes, Mr. Jones, what did you say when you saw this frightful spectacle?"

"I said, 'Look at that geezer hanging up there on that gibbet.' That's what I said."

"That's what you said?"

"I said that."

"And good for you, Mr. Jones."

By such means, it was argued, news might be made palatable enough, provided always that the little-man reader of the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* was prepared to identify himself with little-men readers or little-men not-readers elsewhere. This the opposing faction thought very unlikely. Their argument had the weight of precedent and the time-honored syllogism that had motivated the Publisher's own advertising ever since the early days of Asgard: *Top people take the Lemos Galactic Monitor. This man takes the Lemos Galactic Monitor. Therefore this man is top people.*

Readers, this faction propounded, identify themselves with the top, not with the bottom. It is thus only permissible to describe the death of a Lemos housewife, mistaken by police dogs for an escaping Orgasmon addict from Zanto, if the otherwise unimportant episode were witnessed by at least a secretary of State for Cosmic Relations. . . .

"What did you see, Minister?"

"Eh?"

"I understand you witnessed this unfortunate occurrence?"

"Oh—that!"

"Would you mind telling our readers in your own words just what . . ."

"Well, there were these dogs, you see."

"Yes?"

"And this woman."

"This woman—yes?"

"They ate her."

Properly reported by a competent eyewitness, you can practically feel the snap of the teeth. Or so it was said. But, argue as they might, the newsads continued to appear in precisely the same way as they had done since the electronic revolution and possible long before that. The machines

kept up their campaign against human interference and the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* continued to flourish.

Rome, of course, was not built in a day and its destruction was even longer drawn out. It would have seemed to Phrix a matter of days only since he had left Lemos on his way to Asgard. Voyages between worlds seem only a matter of days to the voyagers. The Ruling Races sleep or indulge in hallucinatory space dreams and the Groils suspend their awareness or think rewarding thoughts. But to those left behind, time goes on as before. The daily round, the common task. Get up. Breakfast on a proteinburger. Put on your hat. Get in the compressed air tube. Wait while the button presses itself. Get out at the office. Watch the machine. Write a memo and put it in the out-tray. Wait while electronic marvels transfer your memo to the in-tray. Show it to the machine. Wait while the machine straightens it, carefully irons it and rules it out. Get back into the compressed air tube. Rocket out in the play-room. Watch and feel a sensivision. Eat a proteinburger. Go to bed. Remove your hat.

It was in fact ten years before anything happened—the time it took Phrix to reach Far-Groil. And then evolution began to stir. One by one, those archexecutives who had Groils woke up to find their mentors gone and for each missing Groil a spacecraft was missing too. The Groils were going home.

On Far-Groil itself, the presses were spreading alarm and despondency among the Ruling Races. "Epidemic from B92 virus imminent. No antidote. Don't be dead. Take ship instead. Hamratty's jumping jets get you there in half the usual time. Don't delay. Fly Hamratty's today," "Groil volcano on point of eruption. Heavy pressures below surface. Far-Groil about to split. Don't be late. Emigrate."

When the Groils returned to Far-Groil, their old planet was peaceful, rural and all its machines quiescently awaiting instructions—programmers of programmers of programmers and so on to the nth degree. Phrix and his fellow Groils went to work with a will. They whistled softly as they deprogrammed.

It was ten years and five days after Phrix had left Lemos for Asgard before the first signs of his new policy appeared. It caused consternation not only among the staff of the Publishing House but also occasioned unprecedented disturbance in the machines themselves. The auto-setters, auto-comps, news assimilators, news emitters, copy-writers and slogameters all began wailing and flashing their red lights. It was a small thing that started the first whinny of objec-

tion: no more than the omission of a half a column on the back page. The house-ad for the Publishing House. "Dear friend—this is the end. Vexed?—the Text—is continued in our next. Read the Lemos *Galactic Monitor*." They wailed much louder the next day when the entire column disappeared, cheating the universe of a proper appreciation of the Zanto and Peripheral Planets Observer, a guide to the penal code, and the combined Gromwold, Shorne, Rymott and Wingfolt Industrial Index. By the end of the week, the entire back page was blank and in two months' time, nothing remained of the paper but the masthead, earpieces, date and volume number:

Motoring? Make for

Good geneticists give
GORMAS GENES

Martin's one-bed

THE LEMOS
GALACTIC MONITOR

Motettes

for mating mothers

24th Pavlovil 30968AE

One day later and nothing remained but:

THE LEMOS GALACTIC MONITOR

So gradually had the change taken place that the reading public had failed to notice that anything was amiss. Even allowing for any automatic adjustments the delivery craft might make in jettisoning undistributed copies, the effect on circulation of the new policy seemed at best marginal. Wage earners on all the planets began their day, as ever, by taking the L.G.M. from their letter-boxes and propping it against the simulated coffee-dispenser. Thus insulated for a short while from contact with their mates, they were able to adjust, set their faces in the right mold of grim determination to succeed so appreciated by employers, and generally prepare themselves for whatever unlikely challenge the day might bring. They ran their eyes down the front page as usual, unaware of having assimilated any less in the way of readable news than usual.

The staff would not have noticed either, but for the wailing of their machines, who, having nothing to do, clicked rapidly from place to place and office to office in the same search for justification as all executives in this or any other age. The staff—that is, the human, Ruling Race staff—on the other hand, were conscious of having at last a real function

to perform. The absence of text in their newspapers called for high-level, higher-managerial decisions and higher-managerial decisions called for a series of daily, top-level conferences which all attended—top-levelers in the flesh and the rest by remote control. The motion on every agenda was the same: Will this trend in publishing, over which we have no control, lead to an increased circulation, a better informed reading public and increased profits on the 30968 balance sheet? The three points were normally numbered 1, 2, and 3 and the answers seemed to be, in that order: 1. The circulation, being controlled, remains constant, regardless of the paper's quality or content. 2. Since human memory is fallible and no one remembers tomorrow what they have read today, the Publisher's papers will continue to inform the public no more and no less than they have always done. 3. Since advertising rates, being geared to circulation, remain constant, there will be no change in revenue from year-in, year-out bookings for the reason that the ads themselves have not appeared.

It seemed therefore that the new policy was a good thing, since costs were theoretically reduced, there being no setting and a considerable saving in ink. The saving was however more logical than real, since the auto-setters, having nothing better to do, syphoned off the surplus ink, the supply of which was as constant and unchanging as everything else. Nevertheless, in the back of everybody's mind was the thought that economies in staff might now be possible and each executive eyed his neighbor covertly and, when the opportunity presented itself, contrived to whisper into any ear that seemed receptive, "Old so-and-so is past it, don't you think?" Certainly it seemed that, should it come to staff reductions, those who had consolidated their position by the right alliances would stay, while those who had been more profligate with their opportunities would drown in a flood of contrived innuendoes.

No one asked how the innovation would affect the economy. Advertising had originally been invented as an integral part of the demand/supply equilibrium. You advertised and thus created a demand which your productive capacity was exactly geared to supply. Remove the ad, and you should theoretically also remove the demand and everything would grind to a halt. It was unthinkable that any housewife would order a washing powder that she had not seen advertised, and yet she did so now in the same volume as before. The balance had leveled between the amount of washing to be done and the amount of powder required to do it.

The Publishing House might have continued to bring blank news sheets under their several titles forevermore. If the practice contributed nothing to the good of mankind, it contributed no evil either. Employment was maintained at its previous level and at breakfast tables everywhere, couples in wedlock or out of it were spared the sobering ordeal of beginning the day by talking to each other face to face with nothing more substantial than a proteinburger to separate soul from soul. It might have continued and probably would have done so forever and day long, but for Marylin.

Marylin was very lonely on Asgard after Shale had discovered the vast libraries available to the Publishing House. All human experience was there on video, audio and sensivo tapes. In fact the ancient compilers had been far more than mere literary hacks. They had not contented themselves with recording for their subscribers sights and sounds and emotions from every corner of the universe, but had drawn extensively on the resourcefulness of their own imaginations to create an otherwise unthinkable mishmash of extended impression and experience. No one who had access to the Publisher's archives would ever need to wander back into the everyday universe or factual happenings. Into the library Shale had gone and in the library Shale stayed.

Marylin first saw the bare pages of the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* on a device known as a Remote Controlled Proof Scanner. No papers were actually delivered to Asgard, and the Proofreader had been installed long ago merely to allow the Publisher to count the ads whenever he chose. The blank pages puzzled Marylin. The absence of text was a clear indication that Phrix had arrived on Far-Groil and had begun the reprogramming of the machines. Why had his activities resulted only in a negation? He had set out, bravely enough, to create a new universe. There was to be an end to the laboratories. The papers were to lead the Ruling Races back to a new awareness. Text was to reawake conscience and consciousness. It was hard to understand how a blank sheet was to achieve this. In the past, ethical systems had fallen into disuse when there had been nothing left to strive for. Mankind organizes itself only in the face and teeth of adversity. This is the law of natural selection. Where no one is around selecting no one bothers to appear worthy. Losing the appearance of worthiness, one ceases to be worthy. How then could a blank page in a daily newspaper recall once-held moral values or create new and better ones? Answer: it could not.

Marylin set the Advertisement manager locator dial. "Come in Phrix!" she ordered.

The locator beams had represented in the old days the major threat to the position and promotion prospects of generations of advertisement managers. It would normally take a year or two before he was traced wherever he might be on his rounds and then, being suddenly and unexpectedly located at any time of the day or night, he was often hard put to explain both his actions and his whereabouts. Advertisement representatives with only single planet territories would appreciate the danger of being located without warning in bed with a Salumi in Lulonga when, according to their recently dispatched weekly reports, they should have been in the antipodes negotiating a difficult contract with Universal Fluorides, Inc.

In fact, Phrix was in no better position than any of his less reputable predecessors when the radiation located him without difficulty, but with a two year delay, on Far-Groil. After the hurried exodus of the Ruling Races, the Groils had found their old planet much to their liking. True, the Ruling Races had built on it. Ruling Races build everywhere. There were a lot of concrete roads and towns and arsenals. But there were also streams and springs and rivers and mountains and forests as there had been in the old days B.E. The Groils had never wanted power or success or wealth or any other of the prize possessions that makes one member of the Ruling Races consider himself better than another. They wanted no more than, in pleasant surroundings, to retire into themselves and think. A laudable and harmless occupation—at least for those who have no responsibilities toward the rest of the universe. Such as Phrix.

When the pulsation reached him and the communicator pad on his navel buzzed, Phrix was sitting cross-legged in the same spot where, with occasional breaks for meals, he had sat for the past three years. It was by the source of a mountain stream where the sun shone and a scented wind blew and where, when the sun set, a limpid moon rose and the temperature never dropped below that of blood heat minus ten.

"Come in Phrix!" he heard.

His mind wandered slowly and luxuriously back through the soft lights and warm shadows, tranquility and fellow-Groil unity of the past years to Marilyn and the problems of publishing and the machines he had, in passing, switched off on his arrival.

It is time, he thought regretfully, *to act*. As a Groil, he hated action.

"Phrix reporting," he said sadly.

He did not need to wait for three years for the Pub-

lisher's instructions to arrive. He knew what he must do: attend to the reprogramming of the machines. Reform the universe. Offer himself, a tool, into the hands of destiny. He sighed. He did not need to ask himself how all this should be accomplished. As a Groil, he knew. The Groil difficulty was always to bring himself to take action unless expressly ordered to do so. But the voice of Marylin's "Come in, Phrix!" was itself an order.

"New universe in the making," he reported. "Self, the tool of destiny."

He got up stiffly and regretfully from the bank of the stream and picked his way carefully among the other, more fortunate, Groils dotted along the hillside, relaxed, comfortably contemplative in the lotus position. Down below, in the valley's white shimmering square mile upon square mile of white concrete, were the ultimate programmers. Their doors slid open at his approach and he walked slowly and silently along an empty corridor toward the ultimate in publishing. The small room, unique in all the universe, where the command of a human voice was obeyed without question by a machine. The dodge was always to know what to say.

"Evolution," Phrix announced, "is on the march."

The machine blinked in fluorescent astonishment and took careful note. Very shortly, the first universe-shattering message was traveling toward Lemos to begin the transformation—the first positive instruction man had given to machine in many millennia. When it arrived, the front page of the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* would bear a single centrally-positioned sentence in very small type.

Watch this space

In the beginning was only the Word.

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